

# THE LUNATIC IN LOVE

J. STORER CLOUSTON



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THE LUNATIC IN LOVE

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MR. CLOUSTON HAS  
ALSO WRITTEN:

THE LUNATIC AT LARGE  
THE LUNATIC AT LARGE AGAIN  
THE LUNATIC STILL AT LARGE  
THE LUNATIC IN CHARGE

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# **THE LUNATIC IN LOVE**

BY  
**J. STORER CLOUSTON**

AUTHOR OF "THE LUNATIC AT LARGE," "THE LUNATIC  
STILL AT LARGE," "THE LUNATIC IN CHARGE," ETC.



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## CONTENTS

### PART I

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	MR. BENNET'S VISIT . . . . .	3
II.	THE SEARCH . . . . .	12
III.	THE HAT . . . . .	19
IV.	AT NIGHT . . . . .	29
V.	THE PARTING GIFT . . . . .	37

### PART II

I.	LIEUTENANT MEAD . . . . .	45
II.	AT THE CAFÉ . . . . .	53
III.	THE SPY . . . . .	61
IV.	AN ACCIDENT . . . . .	69
V.	MR. CRANSTON'S CALL . . . . .	76
VI.	THE MIDNIGHT VISITOR . . . . .	82
VII.	COMRADE KOOKSKI . . . . .	90
VIII.	BERYL . . . . .	99
IX.	THE FIRST CONSULTATION . . . . .	106
X.	THE SECOND CONSULTATION . . . . .	113
XI.	MR. WITHERS . . . . .	119
XII.	THE TELEGRAM . . . . .	128
XIII.	VALENTINE'S VISIT . . . . .	136

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIV. ANOTHER TELEGRAM . . . . .	147
XV. THE EVENING . . . . .	152
XVI. COMRADE GEORGE . . . . .	161

## PART III

I. THE LETTER . . . . .	171
II. THE HUSBAND . . . . .	178
III. THE BURGLARY . . . . .	186
IV. GEORGE'S CONQUEST . . . . .	195
V. GEORGE'S EDUCATION . . . . .	205
VI. THE MORNING AFTER . . . . .	210
VII. THE CIGARS . . . . .	219
VIII. AN INTERRUPTION . . . . .	226
IX. THE RETURN . . . . .	235
X. IN THE FASHION . . . . .	242
XI. FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE . . . . .	248
XII. BLACKMAIL . . . . .	256
XIII. A MEETING . . . . .	265

## PART I



THE LUNATIC LIBRARY  
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# THE LUNATIC IN LOVE

## CHAPTER I

### MR. BENNET'S VISIT

A MAN stopped before a tobacconist's shop on a quiet side street in the town of Brighton. He was a thick set, youngish man, with a large clean-shaven face. Its expression was secretive, wary and resolute. His attire was inconspicuous and highly respectable. As an agent, he was exactly the kind of young man to inspire confidence. As an adversary, even the most inexperienced would put him down as a formidable proposition.

He paused and studied first the lettering over the door. Then he peered cautiously through the glass. The legend ran, "Miss Eve. Tobacco and Cigars." The interior, seen through the door, was exceedingly bright and tidy, but devoid of any occupant. The man stepped back and cast his eyes this

way and that along the quiet street. It was barely eleven o'clock of a grey autumnal morning, and at the moment scarcely a soul was to be seen. Like the surf about a desert island, he heard continuously the distant crash of waves upon the beach, but no other sound at all till he pushed the door open. Then a little bell rang out. The man stepped in and closed the door behind him.

As he stood waiting, he listened intently, and his eyes roved curiously round the shop. It was small but well-stocked, and daintily clean and cheerful. Across the back ran a wooden partition some eight feet high or so, with a door in the middle. At one end of this screen was another entrance, behind the counter, into the back apartment. And within that apartment the proprietrix was evidently sitting.

He heard the creak of a wicker chair, the rustle of paper, a faint sound that might have been made by a skirt, and then a light foot-fall. At each one of these sounds he pricked up his ears. Yet, from his expression, they seemed to be scarcely what he was listening for. Then Miss Eve herself appeared behind the counter.

He saw a slim, erect and graceful figure;

a face that fitted it exactly; fair, shimmering hair parted far to one side; and a pair of piquant long-lidded eyes with a singularly attractive hint of smile in them. Her air was perfectly assured; she was mistress clearly both of herself and the shop. Her manner was courtesy itself.

"Good-morning, Miss," said the man.

His lips smiled, but not his eyes. They were studying her with concentrated attention.

"Good morning, sir," said she politely.

He put his hand in his pocket and drew out a tobacco pouch.

"An ounce of tobacco, please."

"What kind, sir?"

"You have probably got a mixture of your own. Most tobacconists have."

"I am like most tobacconists, sir," she smiled.

"I'll have that then."

She took the tobacco from a canister, weighed it, and filled his pouch in silence. Her customer's lips were shut tight, and he seemed still to be listening—more intently than ever. But with the door closed one could not even hear the sea; and within the shop there was not a sound.

Except to ask the price, he never said a word, as he pocketed the pouch, and very deliberately counted his change. All the while he was listening, and all the while the same dead silence reigned. He buttoned up his overcoat again, and then stepped suddenly forward and leaned over the counter.

"When do you expect Mr. Essington?"

For an instant the long-lidded eyes opened wide. Something flashed in them and was gone. It might have been suspicion, alarm, or sheer astonishment. Then they smiled at him again.

"I beg your pardon, sir? What name did you say?"

"Mr. Essington," said he deliberately, looking very hard at her all the while. "Or Mr. White, if you prefer it."

"And who are they, sir?"

Her manner was innocence itself, and, if possible, more polite than ever. But he merely smiled ironically.

"Oh, you don't know, don't you?"

"I am afraid I know very few of my customers' names, sir. They are mostly merely gentlemen like yourself who come on business. I might not remember even you, sir,

tomorrow. Is there nothing else you wish to purchase this morning?"

"My dear girl, this bluff is no use. I know all about it!"

"In that case there is really nothing more to detain you, is there?"

She made a movement as though she would retire, yet broke it off, even before he answered.

"Shall I remind you of something that happened in this shop a fortnight ago?"

"Just as you like, sir," she said indifferently.

"Come a step nearer. I don't want to shout."

He glanced towards the partition. Her eyes followed his and her brows rose with every appearance of surprise.

"Are you afraid of being overheard, sir?"

"I prefer not to risk it."

She came a step nearer, and he leaned further over the counter.

"A man walked in here one day and made your acquaintance. He may or may not have told you his name then, but a day or two later you certainly discovered it. He came back again to see you and was caught in this very shop by a couple of fellows who were on his

track. He pitched them a yarn that you were his wife, and you played up to him——”

“I beg your pardon. I said nothing whatever!” she interrupted.

“Ah, you remember now! And you see that I know all about it, don’t you? Well, what’s the good in bluffing any further? We understand one another.”

She shook her head.

“I don’t understand in the least why you tell me this or what you want.”

“I tell it you to show you I know; and I want to warn you, Miss Eve. Do you know the penalties for aiding and abetting a lunatic to escape?”

“A lunatic!” she exclaimed. “Then is that what is——” she quickly corrected herself—“What was the matter with him?”

“Yes, it is what was and is still the matter. Didn’t you really know?”

She shook her head.

“I wondered—I didn’t know—I have never asked——” she broke off abruptly.

“Well, you know now anyway. And we know—that’s to say I know all about the first visit and how he gave those two idiots the slip; thanks to your saying nothing, Miss Eve! I also know he is back in Brighton under the

name of White, and spending most of his time in this shop. If you help him to escape again, before I have seen him, I warn you you will get into very serious trouble indeed."

For a moment they looked at one another in silence across the counter.

"Then you only wish—to see him?"

He nodded.

"Exactly."

"Supposing he was to call here, what name shall I say?"

"Bennet. He probably won't know it; but it's my real name all right. He needn't go fancying there's any trickery or humbug."

"I shall tell him that, Mr. Bennet—if he calls."

"And there's to be no humbug or trickery on your side either! It won't pay. I tell you that straight."

He looked, at that moment, a very formidable customer indeed. Abruptly he added:

"I want to see him now. Where is he?"

She met his dominating eye with her most courteous smile.

"But really how can I—" she began.

"Is he in there?" he interrupted, with a jerk of his head towards the wooden partition.

"Certainly not!"

"You are quite sure?"

"Unless he has arrived while I have been talking with you," she said with a faint, ironic smile.

He stood for a moment, frowning at her—and listening. But, as before, there was not a sound to suggest that so much as a mouse was behind the partition. His face relaxed, and he said:

"Well, I believe my own senses anyhow. I'll wait here for him then."

"Wait here?" she gasped, and instantly controlled herself. "But he may not come to-day!"

"I'll take my chance of that," he smiled. "He'll come within the next half hour—if he really isn't here already!"

At that moment the door bell rang out sharply.

They saw a uniformed commissionaire enter the shop; a tall, white-mustached veteran, with one empty sleeve pinned across his breast and a row of medals above it. He saluted Miss Eve, thrust his solitary hand into his pocket as if to bring something out, and inquired:

"Mr. White inside, Miss?"

For a moment she gazed at him too startled

to answer. Mr. Bennet emitted a brief, sardonic laugh.

"No, he is not," she answered.

The man took his hand out of his pocket.

"Got a note for him, Miss," said he. "But my orders is to wait till he comes."

With that he clicked his heels together and stood at attention beside the door.

Her other visitor lowered his voice.

"We must have a little more talk," said he.

He beckoned to her to move along the counter out of earshot. Then he said:

"He is here! I suspected it all the time.  
Now I'm certain!"

## CHAPTER II

### THE SEARCH

MISS EVE by this time had outwardly recovered her composure. She smiled faintly as she answered:

"You seem a very positive gentleman, sir. Where do you think Mr. Essington is hidden?"

"He is in your back room, behind that partition."

"I beg your pardon, sir. He is certainly not there."

Mr. Bennet's voice became persuasive.

"Now look here, Miss Eve. I don't suppose you want to have a scene in presence of this fellow here. Tell me the truth!"

"I have just been telling it."

"Very well!"

He turned away, stepped up to the door of the inner room and tried the handle. The door was locked.

"Ah," he said, coming back to the counter, "you keep that locked, do you? I tell you the

man is inside, and I'm going to have a few words with him." Again his voice became persuasive. "Just a few words, Miss Eve; that's all."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I'm afraid you must wait then till he comes."

Without another word he strode towards the flap in the counter, threw it up, and the next moment stood on the same side as the girl. With her hands behind her back she stood in front of him, barring the way, her face a little flushed, but polite as ever.

"I am afraid, sir, you have lost your way. The place for customers is on the other side of the counter."

"I warned you of the risk you are running. Stand aside, please!"

Over his shoulder she addressed the commissionaire.

"Will you please go and fetch the police? Tell them what this gentleman is like. They will probably recognize the description."

The commissionaire saluted.

"My orders is to wait for Mr. White, Miss. But if you'd like the police fetched—" He turned towards the door.

"Wait a bit!" said Mr. Bennet. "There's

no need for the police—not quite yet. But there may be in a few minutes," he added significantly.

He turned back, regained the other side of the counter, and replaced the flap. Then he addressed the commissionnaire with an air of authority.

"Mr. White is probably in that back room. I wish to see him on legal business. Stand by that door where you are, and if he tries to break out and get away, just keep in front of him till I get hold of him. The man is an escaped lunatic and must be detained at all costs. I am a representative of the law, and I give you full authority to act as I tell you."

Again the old soldier saluted. He answered: "Very good, sir. I won't let the gent past till he gets my note anyhow."

"Thanks," said Mr. Bennet briefly, and with that he leapt upon the counter, and in an instant was looking over the top of the partition down into the back room.

He saw a fire burning cosily, with two wicker chairs before it, a sofa against one wall, a round table covered with a blue cloth, and on it a large parcel wrapped in brown paper and labelled. The label was addressed in a legible hand, and it happened to be so

turned that even from where he was he could read it. The name upon it was "F. White, Esq." But there was no sign apparent of Mr. White himself.

From this spectacle his eyes turned to the proprietrix. Her air was still outwardly calm, but there was a storm-warning in her eye.

"Will you open the door now, or shall I jump over from here?" he asked.

"You get the best view from up there," she assured him, "but if you are really so inquisitive that you can't control yourself, I had certainly better open the door. It would scarcely be safe for such a stout person to jump over the top."

To do Mr. Bennet justice, his burly but muscular form descended from counter to floor as lightly as a cat. But his brows were none the less clouded as he strode through the opened door.

"It is necessary that I see this gentleman, so I shall take the liberty of looking for him," he said.

"I don't think you are likely to recognize a gentleman if you saw one," she replied icily. "But you can look."

He first lifted the tablecloth and looked

underneath, but there was nobody concealed there. He looked under the sofa and drew blank again. At either side of the room was a closed door. He opened one of these and found a shelved cupboard. What he found behind the other is immaterial; it was not the missing gentleman. It became evident that, after all, Mr. White could not have arrived. Yet it was equally evident that his arrival was imminently expected.

"Would you care to lift the carpet?" asked Miss Eve.

"No," he snapped, "but I may inform you that I don't leave this place till Mr. Essington turns up!"

"You may have to wait for a long time," she said, "and I am afraid you will find it almost as tedious as I shall."

"I won't mind that; I am going to wait." He tried to be persuasive again. "Now, my dear girl, one might as well face facts. The man is coming here. That's perfectly obvious. I am not going to do him any harm, but I am going to see him. That's sure and certain. Now, when do you expect him?"

All this time the door into shop had stood half closed. It now opened and the commissaire appeared, saluting as usual.

"Beg pardon, sir," said he, "is this gent you was expecting a tall sort of gent with a 'Omburg 'at on one side of his 'ead?"

"That's his exact description!" exclaimed Mr. Bennet eagerly. "Have you seen him?"

"I saw him not three minutes ago looking in through the door. He didn't open it, just put his nose against it, in a manner of speaking."

"And what happened to him?"

"'Ooked it, remarkable quick. Seemed as though he had seen something he didn't like."

"Damn!" cried Mr. Bennet, very emphatically indeed. "Not three minutes ago, you say?"

He rushed out into the shop, threw open the outer door and looked up and down the street. But there had been time enough for the elusive gentleman in the Homburg hat to vanish completely.

He turned back and addressed Miss Eve with a more threatening air than he had used yet.

"If you conceal this man about the place and help him to escape, you'll find yourself under arrest. I'll see to that!"

"Thank you for warning me," she replied politely.

"Sorry we missed 'im, sir," said the Commissionaire apologetically. "I did my best."

"I know. Much obliged." Mr. Bennet's eye fell on the empty sleeve, and he paused as he was going out. "Where did you lose your arm, my man?"

For the last time the veteran saluted.

"Mons, sir!"

The door closed behind Mr. Bennet, and for a moment there was silence in the shop. Then in a curiously stifled voice Miss Eve asked:

"Has he really gone?"

The veteran opened the door cautiously and peered out. When he closed it again, the amputated arm had mysteriously reappeared, and the vanished hand now plucked off the snowy moustache.

"He's legging it like a postman for the nearest pub," said he.

## CHAPTER III

### THE HAT

HAVING removed his moustache, Mr. Es-sington, *alias* White, proceeded to raise Miss Eve's fingers to his lips with an air of the most devoted gallantry. He was of distinguished and attractive appearance; a credit to his uniform. Like a number of very fair men who retain their slenderness of figure and liveness both of body and mind, he was of wholly uncertain age. His attitude as he bent over the hand of the lady he admired was very charming and graceful. On the other hand it was undoubtedly a trifle unusual. It seemed in fact to embarrass even more than it charmed her. She withdrew her fingers somewhat hurriedly, and after gazing at him up and down burst into uncontrollable laughter.

"Wherever did you get that uniform!" she cried.

"The brother of the lady with whom I am lodging at present, is a guaranteed hero," he

explained. "Observe the medals! He also proved susceptible to a sovereign, and as he is keeping my own clothes as hostages, he is really doing remarkably well. The moustache, I may add, is not his. I hired that separately."

She was still smiling as he followed her into the back room and shut and locked the door behind him. Then she grew suddenly graver, and asked:

"Who is Mr. Bennet?"

"I never heard of the gentleman," he replied.

"I mean that man! He called himself Bennet."

"He should try again," said he. "I could think of a number of much more suitable names. He struck me as a peculiarly damnable sort of fellow. His trousers required pressing and his manners were abominable."

"But who or what is he?"

"One of those damned doctors obviously. Pardon the adjective, but I assure you I often wish the whole profession had but one hind quarter that I might kick it! Forgive me again, but these fellows really do lead me the devil of a life. And their language is so infernally rude. You heard his uncivil description of me?"

"Yes, sir, I did," she admitted, looking at him curiously.

"An escaped lunatic, he had the impudence to call me! Of course you understand that was only a figure of speech?"

"Oh?" said she, and added nothing more.

"What, you think there may be something in it? Well," he admitted, "perhaps there is a little. This is entirely between ourselves of course. I have never told anybody before!"

"Then, the other story you told me hasn't got anything in it?" she inquired, still with perfect politeness.

"You mean about the fellow who owed me £100 and was always trying to pay me back, only I knew he couldn't afford it and so I was running away from him?"

"No. You must have told that to some other girl."

"Ah, I remember now! I told you about the mysterious crime I had committed when I had shell-shock, and how I couldn't even remember what it was myself, and only knew I was being hunted for my life, didn't I?"

"Yes," she said, "that was my story, and I think, sir, on the whole you gave me the best. But you didn't expect me to believe it, did you?"

"I left it entirely to your discretion, my dearest Eve," he replied gallantly. "I have assured you again and again that you will find me the most indulgent of husbands! Eve dear, marry me and prove it!"

"Mr. Essington—" she began.

He interrupted her with a rapturous air.

"How charming to hear you pronounce my real name! I have scarcely ever told it to a girl before!"

"You didn't tell it to me, sir," she reminded him.

"Mere inadvertence," he assured her. "One gets into the habit of being cautious, and bad habits are so dashed difficult to get out of! But this is a digression. Let us return to our muttons. What were they, by the way? Tut, tut! My memory isn't quite as good as it used to be. There was a time when I could remember all the Derby winners for twenty-five years, and the scores fellows made in cricket matches, and all that sort of thing. But now I'm devilish uncertain. The doctors call it a symptom. In fact that's why they are so keen to have me back again in the—well, you know the sort of All-Home-Comforts-Provided places where they lock up the flower of England, don't you?"

"I think, sir, I know what you mean," she admitted with a trace of embarrassment.

"How softly and charmingly you said that!" he exclaimed. "You sympathize with me, Eve! Dear girl, you can't deny it! So far I have kept out of those devils' clutches because I loved my liberty. Now I keep out of them because I love you! I couldn't keep away from you. I had to come back to Brighton. It's an infernally cold place at this time of year and as I daren't be seen in public, I never was so bored in my life; except when I'm here with you." He stopped abruptly and then exclaimed, "I remember now what we were talking about—I was asking you to marry me!"

"I have answered that before," she said hurriedly. "Please don't trouble—"

"It is no trouble!" he interrupted. "I assure you I enjoy discussing the bare possibility, even if it leads to nothing. Before I met you, I didn't know they kept such girls, even in Heaven!"

His voice had a moving ring in it that sent a faint flush to her cheek. She turned away suddenly and said:

"Here is a parcel for you, sir."

"Ah, it has come then!" said he eagerly. As he cut the string he expostulated, "For Heav-

en's sake, stop calling me 'sir'! Imagine your-self head over ears in love with a fellow who kept calling you 'miss'!"

But she only shook her head.

"Ever since I started business, sir, I have made it my rule."

"But I am not here on business. Are you?"

"I am being interrupted," she smiled. "But these are my business premises, sir."

For the instant he made no reply. He had removed the brown paper from the parcel and revealed a band-box. He was now engaged in carefully extracting from it a hat. It was a *chic* hat, in fact conspicuously *chic*; a hat to cry aloud for attention in the paddock at Ascot or on the esplanade at Deauville. He handed it to her with a bow.

"I saw it in a window and thought of you at once. I'm always thinking of you! 'She will look even more entrancing than ever in it,' I said to myself. I ordered it for my wife on approval, to be sent to the Grand Hotel. Then I went to the Grand, ran the risk of having a few drinks in public to establish confidence in me, and told them to send any parcels on here. I shouldn't wear it much about Brighton if I were you. It might be recognized. And of

course if they enquire here, you'll simply say that Mr. White took the parcel away with him. With a little tact there will be no danger at all. Put it on, Eve, and let me admire you afresh!"

"Do you mean that you have never paid for it?" she gasped.

"My dear girl, I would have if I could, but the fact is I couldn't. Between ourselves, I am a mere sieve for money. I shall have to bilk my landlady as it is—"

"Oh, no," she interrupted, "you mustn't do that! I should never speak to you again if you did!"

He seemed a little surprised.

"It is really very extraordinary to find anybody so orthodox and yet so charming. Most good people are so dull. You combine the virtues of a mermaid and a deaconess! Well, since you wish it, I will pay my landlady. She is an infernally bad cook, exceedingly plain-looking, and a non-conformist. I never met anybody less deserving in my life. And of course it will simply mean my bilking everybody else till I can find somebody obliging enough to finance me. But your wish is law!"

"But—haven't you any money of your own, sir?" she hesitated.

"I used to have quite a lot. In fact it's there still, only there's a damned old lawyer fellow who calls himself my curator and he won't let me get at it, unless I let him shut me up in exchange. And even then I'm not allowed to handle it myself!"

For a moment she stood silent; her eyes thoughtful, her air abstracted. He gazed at her till he could contain his emotion no longer.

"You look like the first narcissus of the Spring!" he cried.

She started from her reverie, blushed and quickly turned away. The blush had almost gone when she turned round again, but her eyes were kinder than he had seen them.

"Do you really want to please me a little, sir?" she asked.

"A little? Good God, I want to do nothing else!"

"Then you must do exactly as I tell you. It is for your own sake! You must leave Brighton at once—"

"Leave Brighton!" he exclaimed. "But there's nowhere else in the world where I want

to be! I simply can't tear myself away from you, Eve!"

"You must, or that man will come and tear you! I don't believe he is a doctor—"

"Not a doctor! But who else would be chasing me? My dear girl, believe me I have had so much experience of doctors that I could spot one of the brutes a mile away. I never mean to see a doctor again. Henceforth I trust to chemists entirely!"

"Do you want him to arrest me for helping you?"

For an instant this reminder struck him speechless.

"Heavens, what a selfish brute I am! I'll go to-night. But, Eve dear, I must say good-bye to you first. Let me see you just once again!"

"I want to see you," she smiled. "I have something else to tell you. But it must only be for a very few minutes! Now go, for fear Mr. Bennet comes back!"

"Where and when—?" he began.

"I must do up this parcel again first," she said briskly. "You've got to return the hat at once, sir!"

"Then there won't be even that to remind you of me!" he sighed. "I'll only be an escaped

lunatic who once wandered in and out again, and made himself a damnable nuisance."

She was tying up the parcel, and answered nothing.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few minutes later the white-moustached commissionaire emerged from the shop, carrying a band box under his only visible arm.

## CHAPTER IV.

### AT NIGHT

THAT night, on a windy seat, hard by the sea and removed from the track of passers-by, two dark figures sat, more sedately than is usual among dark figures on lonely benches. Upon their first sitting down the gentleman had indeed tried to adopt the customary attitude, but the lady was firm. She even sprang to her feet.

"My adorable prude," said he, affectionately, and yet with becoming resignation, "I will never offend again! Only I'm afraid I'll have to take a tip from that commissionnaire fellow."

And thereupon she was startled to see him slip one arm out of his coat, leaving an empty sleeve next to her.

"Is that really necessary, sir?"

"If you call me 'sir' out of business hours, I shall certainly develop a very acute form of mania indeed," he replied. "This precaution," he added with a sigh, "is absolutely necessary,

I am sorry to say. My arm is as much in love as I am; and it has led me into the devil of a mess more than once before now, with much less excuse. The side next you becomes intoxicated, Eve! I am not at all sure that I ought not to take my leg out of its trouser."

She changed the subject somewhat hurriedly.

"Is that your taxi waiting?"

"It is our taxi," he corrected. "We escape in it if necessary. The driver is a stout fellow specially picked for his criminal jaw. I have told him you are the wife of the band-master on the pier, and he has quite entered into the spirit of the affair."

He heard a little sound that seemed half a laugh and half a sigh, and then for some moments she sat silent, apparently immersed in her thoughts. Suddenly he cried:

"I love you, Eve dear! I love you, I love you, I love you! Multiply that by a million and it still falls a million miles short of the truth. Why won't you marry me?"

"It's impossible!" she said.

He looked up with greatly increased animation, and in an instant was slipping his arm back into its sleeve.

"When a woman says 'It's impossible!' as

though she regretted it, by gad, there's some hope left!" said he. "A hug may do the trick, dear. Just let me try!"

"No, no, no!"

"You can trust me!" he assured her. "I will be tact itself. Only one step will be taken at a time. Nobody ever loved a girl so much and behaved so discreetly before! Now, Eve, darling, tell me why it is impossible."

By this time they were sitting exactly like the customary couple. Her braced back still protested, but her bent head touched his shoulder. In a low voice she answered,

"For one thing, because you wouldn't dream of asking me if you—well, if you were quite yourself."

"I assure you I am even fonder of my liberty now than when I am a mere commonplace member of society! A wife is the last thing I've usually wanted when I am in what I personally consider my best form."

"But you wouldn't ask a girl in my position!"

"I'd ask *you* if I had come into a dukedom! Your only position that matters, is here"—he touched his waistcoat. "I am sorry I can't make you into a duchess. None of the o'thers would compare with you! I've met some of

them and I know. There's one damned woman— But I beg your pardon, I have strayed from the point. What were we talking about? Ah, I remember; I was regretting I had so little to give you compared with what you deserve. I can however offer you sixty feet of drawing-room—a perfectly beastly room I may add, but we needn't sit in it; also fifteen stone of butler—luckily his weakness is sherry and mine is not, so that I never mind being pillaged by the fellow; his appearance makes up for it. And then there's the usual outfit of maids—it will be safer to sack the pretty ones, once I have settled down; and quite a lot of cars—I've a dim recollection of buying them by the half dozen just before they shut me up. In fact I think that had something to do with it. You won't be at all uncomfortable, Eve dear. Say yes, and I swear to you—”

She interrupted him.

“Mr. Essington!”

“Call me Francis! That's my name.”

“Francis? You told me it was Jack!”

“I know, I know. I forgot for the moment. But I can guarantee Francis as correct.”

She shook her head.

“That shows how far you can be trusted!

Don't talk of marrying me—or anybody else; please don't! Wait till a woman can trust you a little better. I am sure you can really pull yourself together if you try. Try very hard, please! I hate to see you ordering things you never mean to pay for, and bilking landladies, and having to disguise yourself; and never telling anybody the truth. If you really can't help doing that sort of thing, you ought to go to the lawyer you mentioned—your curator—and ask him to look after you again. And if you can help it, well then please do help it!"

For a moment Mr. Essington sat quite silent. He seemed bereft of the power of reply. Then in a very unusual voice for him, he said:

"Good God, what a dilemma! And my dear girl, there are the most infernal difficulties either way. If I went to old Cranston and asked him to shut me up, he'd think it showed so much sense that he wouldn't shut me up! If I try to practise all these charming virtues you mention, virtues I've always admired immensely—at a safe distance—life would be so infernally dull! Besides, I've got no money. How can a man be virtuous without money? Of course one has read of fellows doing it, but it's a trick that wants a lot of practise. I re-

member I once practised balancing two billiard cues, one on top of another, on my nose. It was for a pretty big bet, and I took no end of sweat; but living virtuously, and truthfully, and all the rest of it, on nothing a year . . . ! My charming, saintly, et cetera, et cetera girl, I worship you, and if you want me to turn over a new leaf, I'll do my damnedest; but you see the difficulties, don't you?"

"Couldn't you try to earn something? Meanwhile I mean—till you were able to get back your own house again?"

"*Earn* something?" he repeated in a startled voice. "You mean by offering people bootlaces or matches, or drawing on the pavement? But I don't belong to a trade union! Thank God, that dismisses that solution! I might agitate of course. I believe these agitator fellows make pots of money, and practically never turn a hair making it. But what am I to agitate for? There are a lot of abuses that want mending, I know. There's the super-tax for instance, and all those poor devils in America who can't get a drink. But between ourselves, I don't think I'm cut out for a professional nuisance."

"If you had a little money, just to go on

with, I'm sure you could find something you could do!"

He looked at her doubtfully.

"Possibly, if I had the money. But does that mean that you would *also* expect me to be virtuous and truthful and all the rest of it?"

"I should like you better if you were," she said in a low voice.

"Gad, then I'll try!" he exclaimed. "I tell you what, I might even experiment with the Boy Scout stunt—one good deed a day! I don't suppose I could stand the strain, but there's no harm trying. The principal difficulty is, how am I to remind myself?"

"Think of—" she began.

"Oh, I know what to think of—you! But I might think of you too late. I must wear the letter E in some place where I can see it myself without attracting a crowd; or write it down on something whenever I find I have departed from the truth, or feel tempted to run after another girl, or anything else of that sort. Anyhow, I'll see what I can do, for your sake, Eve."

He drew her closer, and she let herself be drawn. For a moment the two dark figures seemed to become one, and then she suddenly

shook herself free and sprang to her feet.

"Here is a present—a very little present," she said, and put a bulky envelope in his hand. "Just to remind you! Good-bye!"

As if not trusting herself to say more, she turned and ran. Another couple loomed up ahead of her. They stopped to look at the fleeing girl. Francis Essington, in hot pursuit, stopped too, but the girl ran on.

"The devil!" said he, and started on now at a quick walk. In the further distance the bulky form of a policeman loomed up next. The interrupted lover turned on his heel and made straight for his taxi. He looked over his shoulder once, but the running girl had vanished utterly into the night.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE PARTING GIFT

FIVE minutes before the last train to town was due to start, a tall gentleman with a white moustache and every outward appearance of probably being a peer, walked with confident gait and distinguished mien into the station, and presented a ticket which he had taken the precaution of purchasing (though in quite another guise) earlier in the day. As he passed through the booking hall, he congratulated himself very heartily indeed on having taken this precaution. Mr. Bennet was standing in a quiet corner, with his eyes on the booking windows.

As a matter of fact Mr. Bennet had come to the shrewd conclusion that his visit to the tobacconist's shop must certainly have given his quarry the alarm, and in all probability, Mr. Essington, *alias* White, would consider Brighton too hot to hold him comfortably any longer. Hence he would probably depart by train in the course of the day. Accordingly he

had stationed himself in the booking hall a little before the departure of every train since noon, and watched these windows. A man might step into a carriage unobserved, especially if the train were crowded. But at the window of the booking office he was bound to pause. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the patrician with the white moustache, and there seemed to be something curiously familiar about his face, especially the moustache, but Mr. Bennet's acquaintance with the aristocracy was slight, and it must, he thought, be some chance resemblance. He continued to watch the windows, though by this time with fast diminishing hope.

Meanwhile the distinguished looking gentleman had returned the salute of an obsequious porter, whose services had likewise been retained earlier in the day. The porter threw open the door of a first class carriage, wherein a couple of suit cases already occupied two corner seats. The gentleman entered, closed the door, and seated himself on the far side of the carriage. There, as the few remaining minutes dawdled past, he sat keenly watching the door of the booking hall. Very slowly one minute passed, two, three, four, and at last five. And then Mr. Bennet emerged.

The guard raised his lantern, the engine whistled, and the platform began to slide away astern. Mr. Bennet stood frowning at the moving train, almost, it seemed to the fugitive, like a man unconvinced of the genuineness of what he saw.

Mr. Essington pocketed his moustache, lit a cigar, and assumed an easier attitude.

"Another damned doctor diddled!" he said to himself; and then his thoughts took a tenderer turn. "I am twenty-one again! No man in love is older—or wiser than that. It gives one an extraordinarily helpless feeling. I believe I am almost capable of blushing. It would be the greatest bore in the world to have another girl on my knee. And I have undertaken to lead a life of almost saintly severity! Supposing I keep in love, the prospect ahead is undoubtedly gloomy."

There came to him one cheering gleam of hope.

"But all this depends on my being able to afford the luxury of virtue, and by gad, I don't see how I possibly can! Things really may not be so very bad after all, of course. I don't want to disappoint that dear girl—"

This thought suddenly reminded him of Miss Eve's parting gift, the bulky envelope

still unopened in his pocket. He took it out hastily, tore it open, and for a moment stared with bated breath at the contents. They consisted of a brief note and a little bundle of crisp folded papers.

"A tenner!" he exclaimed as he unfolded one of them. "Another! My God, five ten pound notes!"

The note was very brief:

Please use these if you need them. I really don't myself. They may help you to do what you promised. Try to be as nice to other people as you have been to me—but don't give them hats! Don't come back to Brighton. I am certain it *isn't safe*. With my very best wishes.

Eve.

He gazed at this note for a long time.

Meanwhile Mr. Bennet had only stood at the door of the booking hall for a couple of minutes, and the departing train was scarcely out of sight, when there came to him a flash of recollection. Subconsciously he had noticed the tall gentleman with the white moustache being saluted by a porter and led to a carriage. Now he suddenly remembered whom the gentleman reminded him of, and the thought was so strange that he walked straightway along

the platform till he had discovered the same porter.

"Do you know the name of that gentleman you saw into the train?" he asked. "A tall man in a brown suit with a white moustache?"

"No, sir," said the porter, "never saw 'im before."

"Had he a season ticket, or when did he take one?"

"He sent a commissionaire down, about 3 o'clock or so, to take 'is ticket and get 'im a seat. His luggage was left with me."

"A commissionaire!" exclaimed Mr. Bennet eagerly. "What sort of a man to look at?"

"Oh, a tallish man, sir, with only one arm—"

"And a white moustache?"

"Yes, sir."

"At all like the gentleman himself?"

"By gum, now you speak of it, sir, they was most remarkable alike!" exclaimed the porter. "I was wondering to myself who the gentleman reminded me of!"

"Damnation!" muttered Mr. Bennet. "Where is the nearest telephone call office?"

A few minutes later he was finishing a brief urgent conversation.

"No, I can't positively swear, sir, that the man was Mr. Essington, but I'm practically

sure of it. If you have the train met and take the number of the man's taxi, we ought to get on to him all right. Yes; or he could be followed. Sorry he gave me the slip like this—if it is the man. But I think it will be all right yet. Good-night, sir."

## PART II



## CHAPTER I

### LIEUTENANT MEAD

LIEUTENANT VALENTINE MEAD, of the Brigade of Guards, sat on a chair in the empty, sunny Park, with his eyes apparently fixed on Apsley House, but in reality gazing far through stone walls, roofs, and autumn tree tops, at a face. It was the face of a girl, with very black eyes, petite features and daintily powdered skin, and the most provoking expression that ever disturbed the heart of man.

The entire upbringing of Valentine Mead had been designed to protect his heart against faces like that. He belonged to a manorial family who rode very straight to hounds, rose early, kept fit, and conscientiously endeavoured to set an example to their neighbours. It was the kind of family which is rapidly being converted into residents in economical Continental hotels or optimistic fruit farmers in still farther lands, but fortunately for Valentine a seaside resort had been erected on one

corner of his paternal estate, and, thanks to the char-à-banc habit, it was in a particularly flourishing state at present. His rent roll in consequence gave the most genuine pleasure to the Income tax department of the Inland Revenue. And even after they had finished with it, he was left tolerably well off.

In outward person, Valentine was an athletic-looking young man, with a bronzed, comely, and singularly candid face. He was devoted to all outdoor pursuits and nothing was farther from his thoughts than love, matrimony and ladies generally, when he seated himself on his shooting stick a fortnight before, and awaited the first covey of partridges. At the second drive they were joined by the ladies, and a slip of a girl attached herself to him. By the time the day's sport was over he was securely in her bag, and cartridges and partridges were of no more interest to him than the probable climate of Mars.

Her name was Beryl Perrin. Her father was an affluent gentleman of studious habits and advanced social views, who had recently leapt into the limelight through his second matrimonial venture. The lady who selected him was none other than the dowager Count-

ess of Twickenham, a comradeess of still more ultra leanings. Beryl herself had been a modern of the moderns before the appearance of her stepmother. She was now a futurist of the futurists. She appeared at that shooting party because her hosts had never met her before. Her name was struck off the list of their acquaintances for the future before she had been there twenty-four hours. But she had come, seen, and conquered Valentine Mead.

He could hardly believe that was but a brief fortnight ago. Every day since he came back to town he had endeavoured to see her, and had succeeded half a dozen times. Whenever he failed to see Beryl, he endeavoured, as the next best thing, to talk of her to his cousin Marjorie. Marjorie and he had always been the greatest of friends, and it seemed to him the most natural thing in the world to confide in her. For a moment, when he first told her, he had been deeply disappointed by her reception of the thrilling tidings. She had simply stared at him, then looked away, and said nothing whatever. But she had been very nice and sympathetic afterwards, and explained her first demeanour as simply due to the shock of realizing he was sufficiently grown up to fall

in love. And then she had asked no end of questions, and he felt sure she must have been pleased by his enthusiastic answers.

Presently she appeared, coming towards him through the Park, a figure not altogether unlike himself transferred to the feminine sex, tall and fair, with candid eyes, and a manner formed on the old-fashioned model of consideration for others.

"Well, Val," she said, as she sat down beside him, "have you risked it?"

He nodded, but not cheerfully.

"I told her I loved her, Marjorie."

"And what did she say?"

There was no doubt about the interest with which Marjorie awaited his answer.

"Oh," he hesitated, "she didn't say exactly yes, and she didn't say exactly no. But she told me quite frankly it's no use so long as I am merely a thick-skulled back number."

"Oh, but you're nothing of the sort, Val!"

"Yes, I am. I'm not intellectual, and I haven't read the books that 'count,' and I don't like the proper plays—"

"The improper plays, you mean!" she interjected.

"My dear Marjorie, you are prejudiced!"

"I know I am. But go on."

"Well, that's most of it. Oh, and there are all these Russian ideas. Apparently most new ideas come from Russia. One ought to know all about them. In fact I've got to if I'm to be worthy of her!"

"Did she say that?"

"Oh, not in those words. These sort of people don't talk like that. She would think that 'worthy' meant dreadfully dull."

"Oh, I see," said Marjorie, though not quite in as kind a voice as usual. "Did you go down to their place?" she asked.

Again he nodded, and again uncheerfully.

"What's the matter with it?"

"Oh, nothing the matter with *it*; only with *me*. Everything is far over my head!"

"Too high-brow?"

"I don't think they call it that themselves. I mean too deep and advanced and all that sort of thing."

"What is Mr. Perrin like?"

"He must be very clever."

"Why *must*?"

"Oh, the way he looks at one; and he's so difficult to follow—when he does speak. But most of the time he is thinking."

"And Lady Twickenham?"

"Oh, she is brilliant! *She* talks enough. I

couldn't follow her either. I tell you, Marjorie, I'm quite hopeless!"

"Beryl has a brother, hasn't she?"

"Yes," said Valentine, rather briefly, it seemed to Marjorie.

"What about him?"

"His name is George."

"Yes; but what is he like?"

"Well—he's *her* brother—Oh, I'm sure he's a good chap really! He can talk too. I couldn't even follow him. I'm not up to their weight, not even to George's! Though I suppose he is very clever too—and all right once one got to know him. Being *her* brother—"

"Yes, you've mentioned that. Well, Val, I'm so glad you are feeling so happy about it!"

"But I'm *not* happy! I wish I were!"

"Then I'm sorry you are not feeling happy about it, Val."

There was a pause. He gazed again into space. She looked down at the gravel. Suddenly he burst forth:

"The one thing I can't stick—but damn it, I've got to! I didn't mean to say that."

"What can't you stick? I won't tell anybody."

"Her friends, I was going to say—some of 'em anyhow. But Beryl tells me it's simply

the atmosphere. I've been living in the wrong one—too snobbish, and conventional, and all that sort of thing. I've *got* to get the hang of the thing better! And I'm going to do it. I say, Marjorie, did you ever hear of The Blue Cat?"

"Do you mean something you breed for its fur—like Arctic foxes?" asked Marjorie with much livelier interest than she had shown yet. She herself kept poultry, bred rabbits, and belonged to the local ornithological society.

"Lord, no! I mean a café. It's somewhere in Chelsea; very advanced. Beryl goes there a lot. You meet all sorts of rum birds. Come and lunch with me there to-day!"

"*Me* come? But aren't you going with Beryl?"

"Oh, she's engaged somewhere—as usual," he sighed. "But I want to make a beginning, and I rather funk going alone—just at first."

Marjorie's colour rose, and she answered with, for her, unusual asperity.

"I must say, Val, I really think if you want to go into training for becoming a Bolshevik you ought to do it yourself. *I* am not in the least interested in that sort of thing—frankly, not the least."

"Well then, I suppose I must go alone. But

I tell you what I'll do. I'll wait till about three o'clock. The place will be emptier then."

"It will probably be quite empty. You will see nobody."

"I'll get the atmosphere anyhow. That's the first step."

There was a pause, and then Marjorie said, in what she tried hard to make her most sympathetic manner:

"But what a pity Beryl is always engaged!"

"Yes; it's damnable!" said he. "Come on, let's have a walk, Marjorie!"

She rose, but without enthusiasm.

"I'll come as far as Stanhope Gate," she said.

"Hang it, I don't call that a walk!"

"It would give you too good an appetite if we went any farther, since you don't feel you can venture to lunch before three, Val."

She smiled; yet he felt there was something odd about her smile. It wasn't Marjorie's nicest, he thought.

## CHAPTER II

### AT THE CAFÉ

AT two fifty-five Lieutenant Mead issued from his Club with the look of a brave but sensitive man about to go over the top. He raised his stick to hail a passing taxi. The cab stopped, he jumped in, and said in a firm voice:

“Blue Cat, Chelsea! I don’t remember the street. Do you know it?”

“Perfectly, sir,” said the driver. “I use that hostelry occasionally myself.” And then with a courteous smile he inquired, “You wish to see a little bit of life, I presume?”

For a moment the young guardsman seemed a trifle taken aback. Then he said to himself, “Ex-officer, of course! Poor devil!” Aloud, with the most considerate politeness, he replied:

“Yes, that’s more or less my idea.”

The driver glanced at him with evident approval.

"You are making a promising beginning, sir," said he.

As he was being driven westwards at somewhat unusual speed, grazing the traffic by a slenderer margin than ordinary, Valentine felt inclined to agree that, so far as a sensation of strange adventure went, the beginning was not unpromising. "If one was really keen on this sort of thing," he added to himself.

The Blue Cat presented no outward appearance either of eccentricity or vice. Within, it was decorated in a style which the young officer recognized as stamping it with modernity. "Anyhow I have at least learnt that!" he said to himself with some satisfaction. "And if I put my back into it, it may not seem quite so horrid in a few months time." He selected a table at the farther end, as far away as possible from the two or three parties who still lingered over their luncheon, and seated himself resolutely.

Sitting there in splendid isolation, he studied the menu and ordered what he conceived to be the most advanced dishes it contained. Then, gradually growing bolder, he surveyed the room and the few remaining guests. A plate of soup arrived, and as he supped it, Val-

entine's thoughts forsook the present completely, and flew back to that face. He saw it smiling; he saw it pouting and disdainful; he saw it. . . . But at that point he was recalled to earth by a cultivated and agreeable voice.

"Dark or fair, sir?" it inquired.

At the same moment a tall figure in leather gaiters loomed up at his side, and with a start, he recognized his taxi-driver. Seen without his peaked cap, this person appeared still more obviously than before to be an unfortunate member of the demobilized officer class.

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow," said Valentine, courteously.

"I refer to the lady of your thoughts. I am in love myself and recognized the symptoms at a glance. I have already rammed three omnibuses while musing on my own distractor. Shall we exchange reminiscences?"

And with that he seated himself on the opposite side of the small table.

"You wished to see life," he added pleasantly, "and lunching with a taxi-driver will be one of the first of your new experiences; and I trust not the least pleasant. You will pardon the liberty, I hope?"

"Certainly!" said Valentine, who by this

time was beginning to promise himself a more amusing afternoon than he had dared to hope for.

The waiter approached and the driver addressed him.

"Lunch, please. All the courses you have; your best, in fact. Imagine yourself to have been rescued from a fortnight on a raft, and bring me everything you think you could tackle." He turned to Valentine and asked, "Shall we toss who pays for both lunches?"

"Certainly not! You must lunch with me."

"With pleasure. I thought that would be the result," smiled the driver. "They do keep champagne here, I may add. I tell you simply for your information."

"Wine list, please!" said Valentine to the waiter.

"A gentleman in a guards' tie would look very odd in such a place if he did *not* drink champagne," added the driver in a confidential aside. "I thought I had better just mention the point. If you would like my advice in choosing the brand, or the year, or the shippers, it is at your disposal."

A bottle of the best champagne procurable was ordered, and the resourceful taxi-driver once more suggested:

"What about beginning with a cocktail?"  
Valentine shook his head.

"You can have one, if you like; but not for me! I don't believe in mixed drinks at this time of day."

The other sat up and looked at him alertly, with a touch of anxiety.

"Good God!" said he, "you are not by any chance a doctor, are you?"

He pushed back his chair as he spoke, and cast an eye on his cap hanging on a neighbouring peg.

"No; I am afraid I am not."

"My dear fellow, it was I who was afraid! But if not a doctor, why this exemplary abstinence?"

"I try to keep fit," explained Valentine.

The taxi-driver heaved a sigh of relief.

"You have my sympathy. I once tried to keep fit myself. I often suspect it was that which has given me a curious loose feeling near the top of my head ever since. For a moment I was afraid you were one of those damned doctors disguised. They stick at nothing!"

"Which doctors?" asked Valentine.

"All doctors; particularly those who have examined me. They say I have varicose veins

and want me to lie up for it. But I really can't afford to take the time off duty." At this point he pulled himself up abruptly, and murmuring, "Only a little one, still—!" took from his pocket a lump of chalk and proceeded to write what appeared to be the letter E upon his left sleeve. "A memorandum connected with my professional duties," he explained, and then, as if suddenly seized with a similar thought, inscribed a second E on his sleeve.

"Two running already!" he said to himself. "It is scarcely worth while putting the chalk back in my pocket."

"You will quite understand now," he said aloud, "why I am relieved to find you a genuine guardsman."

Valentine seized the opportunity to ask the question he had been longing to put.

"You have been in the Army yourself, I suppose?"

"Ah, you have spotted the out-at-elbows ex-officer! We can't disguise ourselves! Yes," continued the taxi-driver with a manly and candid air, at the same time adding another and very large E to the collection on his sleeve, "You may address me as Major Blank. Forgive my caution in slightly modifying my actual name. That is better to be in abeyance

meanwhile; and I cannot bring myself to deceive you by inventing a false name." (He did not add an E this time; and a look of conscious virtue took its place) "May I ask yours?"

The exchange of names was completed just as the bottle of champagne arrived. The wine bubbled out of the gilded neck. Cabman and guardsman each raised his brimming glass to the other. Acquaintance progressed rapidly.

The ex-Major's tact, charm and assurance were not long in extracting an outline of Valentine's case. The girl, in fact, was already half extracted. Her father, her step-mother, her circumstances, followed easily; and even poor Valentine's despair of ever proving himself worthy of winning her.

Major Blank listened to the tale with sympathy upon every lineament of his agreeable countenance. Sometimes it showed itself by attentive silence; sometimes by such excellently chosen observations as: "My dear fellow, how extraordinarily interesting!" or "Exactly like my sensations when my own dear girl removed my arm from her waist!" or again, "They do make it go pit-a-pat, don't they?"

At last there kindled in his eye a flash of

inspiration. "My chance of a good deed!" he said to himself. "I can put away my chalk!"

Pocketing his lump of chalk, he held out his hand cordially to his young host.

"I place my services at your disposal!" he exclaimed. "I will see you through it!"

## CHAPTER III

### THE SPY

FOR the first moment there appeared to be more surprise than pleasure in Valentine's emotions on hearing this hearty offer of assistance. But so admirable was the Major's tact, and so cogent were his arguments that the young officer soon began to realize what a remarkably capable assistant Providence had provided him with.

"I am myself in the thick of the modern movement," the Major assured him. "For years I itched to be modern, till I positively scratched! Now I am past that uncomfortable stage, and in the fortunate position of being able to lend a hand to a fellow aspirant. My own dear girl makes even more exacting demands upon my attachment; in fact these little memoranda on my sleeve are connected with her divine requirements. I call them divine because they are such a damnable strain upon ordinary human nature. By the way, I haven't described her to you, have I?"

"No," said Valentine. "But—er—I'd like very much to hear all about her, only we were talking about the modern movement, weren't we?"

"Pardon me: so we were. My memory, I may explain, gives me a little trouble occasionally. Merely an old war injury, but, like my Eve's wishes, a bit of a nuisance at times. You tell me you have been reading up the subject, haven't you?"

"I have made a beginning," said Valentine modestly. "I've been reading Wells—"

"By gad, I know all about him!" exclaimed the Major, evidently very pleased to find they had been working on common lines, "I've seen him box often."

"What!" exclaimed Valentine. "Do you mean to say that's the same fellow?"

"Of course," said the Major with a great appearance of confidence. Yet he passed somewhat hurriedly on to the next prophet, "And who else have you been reading?"

"I have begun to tackle Shaw—"

Again Major Blank could not contain his pleasure.

"Met him in Persia," he interjected.

"Persia?" exclaimed Valentine.

The Major was perfectly confident this time. "I had an introduction to one of his eunuchs. He's the devil of a swell out there. I could tell you some very entertaining stories of his harem. But I must say I didn't know he had taken up . . ." the gathering surprise in his host's face warned the gallant Major of the danger of the least lapse from complete assurance, and he hastily corrected himself. "But what am I talking about? We discussed polygamy for half an hour! In fact I've got one of his pamphlets at home. It deals with the problem of how many times one can use the same bridesmaids. Well, I don't think you could have gone to two better sources of information!"

"I am afraid what is going to beat me is Russia!" sighed Valentine. "These people seem to do nothing except go to Russian plays, and talk about Russian art, and admire Russian Soviets; and hang it, I can't see the point in it all! And they seem to know I don't. Beryl told me so. Oh, I'm no use to her as I am! And how is one to become different?"

During this despairing speech, his guest's expression became for the moment less sympathetic. But this was evidently merely because

some stirring new thought had visited him. Thereafter his face grew even more sympathetic than before.

"Are you in a position to finance an enterprise which would have for its sole object your happiness, and whose success would be absolutely guaranteed by its promoter—subject of course to the usual risks of the act of God and the King's Enemies?"

Though he had drunk almost his fair share of the champagne (to keep exactly in step with the Major would have been very difficult indeed), Valentine remained cautious enough to demand a little more explicit information.

"To be exact," explained Major Blank, "the object of the enterprise would be to place the lovely Beryl in your arms, and the person responsible for carrying it through would be myself. This, however, would mean my tearing myself away from my taxi for a time, and the loss of revenue I should put down as, say, a hundred pounds. That includes, of course, the value of the objects of virtu occasionally left in my cab, and the chance of my winning an action for damages against a pedestrian who had endeavoured to get under my wheels. Or what do you say to fifty pounds down now and another fifty pounds if I win the lady for you?"

Or if you care for a sporting flutter, we might toss—heads twenty pounds, tails two hundred pounds. I leave it entirely to you."

"I call it very sporting of you indeed, Major," said Valentine. "And if you really did manage to do anything to make Beryl care for me, you may be quite sure that you could ask your own reward! And of course I'd never allow you to be out of pocket in any case. But what could you possibly do?"

From the Major's pleased expression it was evident that he was entirely satisfied with this answer. He again took out his chalk and recorded another E, and then made the surprising disclosure:

"I am a Russian! Yes, you may well look surprised. I come of a Devonshire family on my mother's side, and my English is considered remarkable even in the most cultivated Soviet circles. In fact, I make a point of never, on any pretext, speaking my native language, for fear of impairing the purity of my English accent. After the usual escapades of a Russian youth—sledging and shooting wolves and running away with my friends' wives and chucking up the sponge in despair, and so on, I entered a crack Cossack regiment."

"Then you are a Major in the Russian ser-

vice!" exclaimed Valentine with much interest.

"Hush, my dear fellow; not quite so loud! I was—but I have left it for the Secret Service! I have a price of a thousand roubles on my head, and . . . Good God, there's a fellow after me now!"

He was sitting with his face to the wall and his back to the room. Opposite him, upon the wall, was a large mirror, and in this he saw reflected the figure of a burly, youngish man enter the restaurant and stand near the door, gazing down the room towards their table. It was Mr. Bennet.

"Who is he?" asked Valentine eagerly. His adventure seemed to him to be rapidly becoming more and more interesting, and any passing doubts he may have felt as to the literal exactness of some of his new friend's statements were set at rest by his conduct now. There was no doubt at all that the sight of this stranger had suddenly strung up the eloquent ex-Major into the vigilant and acute man of action—a typical Secret Service agent.

"A spy! I've had a queer suspicion I was being shadowed for the last week. Now I know!"

"What are you going to do?"

"I can't tell till he makes a move. But he may not give me more than a minute longer. Have you got one of your cards? Write on it —'To introduce a Russian friend.'"

"You don't want your name or rank mentioned?"

"No; on the whole it leaves me with a freer hand. I may mention that I am Major Blank —or even give my real name. It will depend on circumstances. Just leave a space where I might add a word myself. Thanks; that's excellent. And now if you could possibly spare me a tenner or so, just to be going on with, I should feel infinitely obliged to you."

Meanwhile the new-comer had hailed a waiter and exchanged a word with him. The waiter now left him and came down the room.

"That gentleman wants your taxi," said he.

"The devil he does!" replied the Major. "Does he propose to drive it himself? If so, ask him for his licence."

"He wants to hire it. You've got to drive it, of course."

For a moment the taxi-driver hesitated.

"I might tell him you've engaged me," said he to his host, "but on the whole—yes, one doesn't want a scene. I'd better go. Tell him I am just coming, waiter."

He rose and shook hands warmly with his new-found friend.

"If I can once get rid of this pestilential person, you can trust me to devote myself to Beryl and you! I have your address on your card. I regret I cannot give you mine at the moment. It is a trifle uncertain. I haven't told you yet about my own girl, but you can think of me sighing for her and working for you! She is fair, by the way, the politest woman in Europe, absolutely. However, I'm afraid that damned spy is looking impatient. Good-bye!"

## CHAPTER IV

### AN ACCIDENT

AS he strode down the room in a confident, leisurely fashion, with the peak of his chauffeur's cap well over his eyes, the ex-Major of the crack Cossack regiment presented a highly professional appearance. He looked, in fact, the ideal taxi-driver. But his thoughts were entirely unconnected with driving cabs.

"The devil spotted me a week ago—I thought it was he!" he said to himself. "Why didn't he nail me before? This is the deuce and all! He is not like any doctor I ever met before. I don't know where I am with the fellow!"

He touched his cap smartly to Mr. Bennet, and asked with a sharp nasal twang,

"Going far, sir? Engine isn't pulling very well, and back tyres likely to bust any minute. I'd recommend another taxi, sir."

"I prefer yours," said Mr. Bennet curtly, and led the way out.

For a moment his driver wondered, "Shall I lay him out and bolt?"

He marked the very place behind the ear to deal the blow, but there were foot passengers on the pavement and traffic passing.

"Not good enough," he said to himself, and threw the cab door open.

"No, thanks. I'm going to sit in front with you," said Mr. Bennet.

His driver shook his head firmly.

"Isn't allowed by the new regulations, sir. You've got to get inside."

"I know the regulations, Mr. Essington. Get into your seat."

Mr. Essington stared at him with a very life-like expression of indignant surprise.

"'Icks is my name, sir, spelt with a silent H. Christian name William, beginning with W. I've won two libel actions already through people calling me by my wrong name. What about taking a bus? They don't mind what they're called."

Mr. Bennet replied by silently motioning him to take his place at the wheel.

"One meets some rum 'uns on this 'ere job!" said his driver with a shrug.

He took his place at the wheel nevertheless, and Mr. Bennet got in beside him.

"Take me to Piccadilly Circus, and you needn't hurry," he said.

They started off in silence. It was maintained for several minutes, Mr. Essington growing all the while more surprised and more uneasy.

"If I once get rid of this customer, I'll take dashed good care he doesn't catch me again!" he said to himself. "How did he get on to my track? Why didn't he tackle me sooner? And why the devil doesn't he speak now?"

He himself was always conversationally inclined; and at last he broke the ice by inquiring:

"Admirer of the ladies, I presume, sir? If you don't mind my saying so, you look the sort who generally has a breach of promise or two on his hands. Kind of gentleman they can't resist; that's you, sir, in a nut shell."

"Oh," said Mr. Bennet, "you think so, do you? And what about yourself?"

Mr. Essington felt considerably relieved, though if possible even more puzzled, to find his remarks taken in this pleasant spirit; even though Mr. Bennet's large secretive face and curt manner remained as forbidding as ever.

"Me, sir? Oh, I've had my lucky days, I don't mind admitting. That was before I met

Mrs. 'Icks, naturally," he added, remembering his new character. "'All my fancy turns upon Nancy,' now. 'One man, one woman'; that's been my motto ever since I met 'er."

He sighed involuntarily; his thoughts flying from the fictitious to the real enslaver. His fare glanced at him curiously.

"Oh," he said in a moment, "that's your trouble, is it?"

"Woman was the trouble with my grandfather, and he used to tell me it ran in our family ever since they came out of the Ark. However, we shouldn't have been born without the weakness, so it's not for me to grumble."

For a few minutes there was silence again. Abruptly Mr. Bennet asked:

"Does Mrs. 'Icks live in Brighton, by any chance?"

"Brighton!" exclaimed her husband. "The poor woman's never been further than Brompton Cemetery in her life—and only for funerals then!"

"Her name doesn't begin with E, does it?" persisted Mr. Bennet.

"If you mean to suggest that my wife is called either 'Ell-fire or 'Elp-me-God, just say so, and we'll get off this cab and 'ave it out!"

retorted his driver with a fine show of indignation.

There was a brief pause, and then in a low, formidable voice, his fare addressed him.

"You have been at large long enough, Mr. Essington."

A bright thought struck that gentleman. Might not Mr. Bennet's silences be due to a twinge of doubt whether he had got the proper man?

"Essington? S'welp me, I remember now where I've heard that name! Only last night a gent came along—regular toff, to 'ire my cab. Looked at me hard, he did, and said 'Hullo, Essington!' I told him what I thought his own name probably was and he apologized handsomely. Said the resemblance was marvellous. Our best girls couldn't have told Essington and me apart. In fact he offered to bet me a fiver I could take Essington's girl to the movies and she wouldn't know it wasn't the same man who had kissed her the night before. And now you've made the same mistake!"

Mr. Bennet smiled grimly.

"It's no use, Mr. Essington. You've been watched from the time you left the train at

Victoria. That was when you'd come from Brighton. People think London is the place to hide in. But it isn't—not from me! And now when we've got to the end of this drive, I'm afraid . . . ”

He never finished his sentence. The instant Mr. Essington perceived that the bluff had failed to come off and heard the hint of threat in his fare's voice, his mind was made up. They must part company; and that at once. They were running at a moderate speed along Buckingham Palace Road. Evening had now fallen. The arc lamps shone bright, and the lights of the swiftiling flitting traffic. Overhead it was quite black, and dark between the lamp-posts. While Mr. Bennet was speaking, his driver increased speed till they were approaching forty miles an hour. Now he suddenly let go the wheel and leapt out.

But for extraordinary luck, and a long experience of falls in the hunting field and how to take them, Mr. Essington's career would assuredly have come to an end there and then. It is true he had selected a clear stretch of road, so that at all events he should escape being run over. But he turned at least one somersault, and was still sitting in the middle of the road in a very dazed condition, when his cab, after

shooting across the road, colliding with a car coming in the opposite direction, and mounting the pavement in company with it, finally finished its career by charging the wall of the station. There was a loud crash and the louder report of a bursting tyre, and then a vision of eight wheels spinning in the air.

"By gad, they'll rope me in as a witness, if I sit here much longer!" he said to himself, and recovering his feet with an effort, reeled to the farther pavement. A minute later he was round the first corner, heading for Ebury Street, with a swift and creditably firm stride.

"I can't go about looking like this any longer, and I can't stay in London," he said to himself. "Whoever the man is, he's a damned dangerous dog; that's to say if he is still alive. And fellows like that never seem to get hurt. It's the good men who die. Gad, I'll have to do something to queer the scent, and do it quick too!"

## CHAPTER V

### MR. CRANSTON'S CALL

**I**N the ward of a private hospital Mr. Bennet lay, with a bandaged head and one arm in splints. A nurse came towards his bed, leading a small, elderly gentleman. He was immaculately attired in dark clothes of a professional cut; on his nose was a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses; this nose was large, and his mouth thin-lipped and tight shut.

"Thank you, you can leave us now," he said to the nurse.

He approached the bed and nodded to the patient.

"Well, Bennet, I thought I had better come myself and see how you were getting on," said he.

"Thank you, sir, I'm a bit better to-day," said Bennet.

There had not been much sympathy in his visitor's voice, and there was no very lively gratitude in his own reply.

"I am sorry for you of course, Bennet, but

I am afraid you rather botched the business."

Mr. Bennet flushed and his brows contracted.

"It wasn't my fault, Mr. Cranston. I was doing your work for you, and trying to do it to the best of my ability."

"What were you actually doing when you ran this very superfluous risk—knowing the reckless kind of man you were dealing with?"

"What you wished me to do. First I drew him a bit to see the state he was in."

"Ah! And what did you make of him?"

"Mad as ever, so far as I could judge from his conversation. Tried to bluff me by pretending he was a real cabman. Talked utter nonsense. Then I set about giving him a fright to clear him out of London. I told him he had been watched ever since he arrived in town—"

Mr. Cranston interrupted sharply.

"What did you tell him that for? He will wonder why he hasn't been collared and locked up!"

"He hasn't the sense."

"He has more sense than you showed, Bennet. So you actually let him know all this?"

"How else could I have done what you wanted me to? You want him kept away from

London, sir; and I had to use my own judgment and take the best steps I could."

"Why couldn't you have simply told him you were going to take him back to an Asylum?"

"I began to tell him that and I hadn't finished my sentence before he had jumped out of the cab and left me to pay the penalty for following your directions, sir."

"I gave you no such directions," said Mr. Cranston sharply. "I didn't make you my confidential clerk because you were a fool, Bennet; and I trusted to your wits to do the right thing. Yet you frightened him out of Brighton, where he was safe enough—"

Bennet interrupted his master. His temper was manifestly rising.

"You insisted on my seeing him there, sir! I did precisely what I was told that time."

Mr. Cranston bit his lip. It was clear that Mr. Essington's latest performance and complete disappearance thereafter had disturbed him profoundly. His eyes travelled round the room, and his gloom deepened.

"You seem to be flourishing, Bennet," he said in a moment. "A private home like this must run you in for a good bit of money."

"I thought, sir, you would prefer me to be

comfortable, seeing that I was injured doing your business."

"So long as you quite understand you are being comfortable at your own expense."

"I am counting, sir, on your paying."

The two men looked into each other's eyes for a moment. Mr. Cranston came a step nearer the bed, and his voice sank, but became none the less formidable.

"You must understand me a little better, Bennet. You know your own record. You know what I have overlooked. If I turned you loose, what would your prospects be?"

"Pretty good, sir," said Mr. Bennet calmly. A man who has been your confidential clerk would have no great difficulty in getting a billet."

"You would have to come to me for a reference.

"I don't think you would refuse one, sir—under all the circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

For a moment Bennet hesitated. Then he answered guardedly:

"I have drawn my own conclusions about this Essington business. You are his lawyer and his curator, and yet—" he left his sentence significantly unfinished.

"I can justify every step I have instructed you to take. You took a note of your instructions, I suppose?"

"No, sir, you know I didn't."

Mr. Cranston's tight lips curled into something suggesting a smile.

"That was very careless of you. I had better repeat them now. You were to endeavor to discover that unfortunate man's whereabouts and report them to me. That was all."

For a moment there was silence. Then Bennet answered, still outwardly calm:

"You have got up too early in the morning for me, sir. If you say those were your only orders, of course, I have no evidence to the contrary. As to his affairs—"

"You know nothing," Mr. Cranston rapped out.

"No, Mr. Cranston, I don't. I may have my ideas, but I know nothing."

Mr. Cranston looked down at him very hard indeed.

"You quite understand me now?"

"Perfectly, sir. I have got to pay my own doctor's bill and my own expenses in this home?"

"I'll allow you £5 towards them, Bennet; seeing that you were endeavouring—though

in a singularly stupid fashion—to carry out what you conceived to be my orders."

"Five pounds!" exclaimed Bennet sardonically, and then checked himself. "Very well, sir; I am much obliged to you for your great generosity."

"Don't try to be sarcastic, Bennet. You can't afford it. Good-morning."

"Good-morning, sir."

The lawyer walked away, erect and spruce. Mr. Bennet watched him with a lowering eye.

"I'll make you pay for this, you little scoundrel!" he muttered. "This is not the end of it!"

## CHAPTER VI

### THE MIDNIGHT VISITOR

BEECH HOUSE, the residence of Mr. Robert Perrin, J. P., stood in a pleasant part of Surrey, surrounded by ample grounds. It was reached by an avenue of considerable length, with an inhabited lodge at the entrance gates, and was altogether an eligible country seat. By some of the sterner spirits of his sect it had been deemed at one time unsuitably eligible for an advanced socialist. Its modest name and its semi-suburban situation no doubt distinguished it favourably from the Halls of the squirearchy. At the same time it had been felt that an edifice with so many rooms and no spittoons was inconsistent with Mr. Perrin's professions.

Of late, however, it had come to be realized that the more money a man has, the more good he can do with it. Therefore the aim of the advanced party should obviously be to catch as many rich men as possible, and either vaccinate or baptize them with the social serum

(the process is still a trade secret, and the present writer is not quite certain which method is employed). They can then give very pleasant luncheon parties to their new comrades, enabling the comrades to see for themselves whether champagne is really as bubbly as it is painted, and their wives to study the fashions.

Mr. Perrin was not one of these recent converts. He had been seriously minded from his youth up. As a child he preferred square solid blocks, with as quiet pictures as possible on them, to glittering topheavy soldiers. As a boy he kept comparatively clean. As a young man he was a total abstainer, and was only rescued by marriage. At twenty-five he formally turned socialist, and for a time enjoyed among his friends the reputation of being a very dangerous person. So far, however, he had done nothing more violent than read a paper on the Evils of Capitalism before a local debating society. But now that he had taken as his second help-mate the once beautiful and still energetic Countess of Twickenham, considerably livelier developments were confidently expected.

One evening, about the hour of eleven-thirty, the lodge gates were thrown open to admit the passage of Mr. Perrin's car. As this chronicle

is not a trade circular, it is unnecessary to specify the make of that vehicle. It is sufficient to say that it was exceedingly long, exceedingly shiny, and exceedingly unlike the cars of most proletarians. Mr. Perrin and his countess sat with closed eyes in the back seat, feeling a little fatigued by their exertions at a working man's social in Wandsworth. In front sat a chauffeur, long and shining like the car.

As the car passed the gates, the lodge keeper stepped forward and cried out something that was inaudible through the glass. The Countess woke up with a start.

"What is the woman saying?" she demanded.

"Something about seeing a man in the park, my lady," said the chauffeur.

"Ask her what man."

The chauffeur exchanged a few words with the woman.

"She doesn't know, my lady, but she thinks he had got over the paling."

"Somebody after one of the maids! We must really set traps for their paramours. I don't mind a little immorality, but I am not going to have my house made into a night club," said the Countess, with a touch of irritation.

"Go on!"

The car rolled on up the drive. The front door was opened by a butler as creditable to Socialism as the chauffeur, and Mr. Perrin and the Countess went into the drawing-room, where light refreshments were set out on a small table.

"What will you take, my dear?" asked Mr. Perrin, slipping an artistically cut morsel of caviare sandwich into his own mouth.

"Whisky and soda—rather long," said Lady Twickenham. "Oh, my dear man, what an evening! I adored Mr. What-d'ye-call-him's ideas, especially about hanging the whole Tory Cabinet on lamp-posts—wouldn't they look delicious?—but I really do wish the man would change some of his garments occasionally! I can smell him still! I wonder if it is quite impossible to keep bloodthirsty after you are cleaned. I don't see why it should be, and it would make these people so much more amusing."

"Amusing, my dear, is scarcely the word—" Mr. Perrin began with a solemn face.

"Oh, don't preach! I've had enough of that to-night already. Really, Robert, if people begin to make Socialism dull, I'll think seriously of turning Tory again."

Mr. Perrin looked still more solemn, but his

reply was never made. Beech House was a choice example of Victorian architecture, and among its amenities it possessed a spacious conservatory opening off the drawing-room. At that moment there sounded from its darkened depths a loud and startling crash.

"Heavens! A flower pot!" cried the Countess. "Is it a cat, or—"

She paused and looked at her husband.

"Or what, my dear?" he inquired mildly.

"The man—who got over the paling!"

Mr. Perrin positively jumped.

"I had not thought of that!" he said in a low voice.

"Withers won't have gone to bed yet. Ring for him at once!"

Mr. Perrin approached the bell very cautiously, with one eye on the conservatory door, and rang violently. For the next few minutes neither spoke, and both eyed the door. Then the butler entered. He was a middle-aged, full-figured man, dignified in bearing, with a pale, large face and perfect manners. Only his eye, unfathomably shrewd and wary, gave a hint of possibilities behind those manners. He looked inquiringly at his master, who in turn looked helplessly at his energetic Countess.

"Did your ladyship ring?" inquired Mr. Withers.

"Hush!" cried the Countess in a loud whisper. "We think there is a man—"

She was interrupted by the crash of a second flower pot. All three gazed at the darkened conservatory with very blank faces indeed. And then out of the darkness emerged a face. It was bearded and crowned with a black felt hat; a very sinister apparition. Its owner tried the handle of the door and, finding it locked, rapped on the panes. So far as they could judge of his darkened visage, it appeared to be smiling—in what the stranger no doubt intended to be a conciliatory manner. But the three in the drawing-room remained none the less perturbed.

"Fetch a gun, Withers! As quickly as you can!" commanded the Countess.

Withers fled, and in the meantime she worked for time by several gracious inclinations of her head directed towards the conservatory door.

"He must not suspect we are going to shoot him!" she whispered to her husband.

The gun appeared, and the dauntless lady issued a further command.

"Robert, unlock the door! And you, Withers, point your gun at the villain and shoot him instantly if he does not surrender at once!"

"I—I—I wonder if it is quite safe," stammered Mr. Perrin.

"Funk!" said the Countess. "All right, I'll unlock the door."

Withers raised the gun to his shoulder and shut one eye. Being a confirmed right-eyed winker, he happened to close the wrong eye. On the other hand the target was tolerably large, and it would have been difficult to miss with both eyes shut.

"Now, Withers, put your finger on the trigger and be ready!"

She unlocked the door and threw it open, revealing the complete figure of a tall individual, attired in a scarlet bow-tie with very long ends, a black frock coat, and a pair of Russian top boots. In one hand he carried a small suitcase.

"He has burgled the house already!" cried Lady Twickenham.

The stranger bowed politely.

"Pardon me, Madam," he replied in a refined voice, marked by a distinct foreign accent, "this bag, she does contain my personal luggage."

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"A brush for hair, a brush for teeth, one pair slippers, six handkerchief, a sock for my left foot, a sock for my right, a pyjama to sleep in—"

The Countess interrupted this catalogue.

"But who are you?"

"Permit me to show you my introduck." He placed his bag on the ground and thrust his hand into his breast pocket.

"Shoot him!" gasped Mr. Perrin. "He is getting his revolver out!"

There was a little click from the gun and a muffled exclamation from Withers.

"Damn! Beg pardon, sir, but I must 'ave forgot to load it!"

"An apology, he is quite unnecessary," said the stranger courteously. "I would only have gone to Heaven and you should have been hanged. It is better as it is."

He took out a card, and with another profound bow, presented it to Lady Twickenham. To her vast surprise she read the name, club, and address of Mr. Valentine Mead, and in addition, this pencilled introduction:

"To introduce a Russian friend, Comrade Kookski from Moscow."

## CHAPTER VII

### COMRADE KOOKSKI

AFTER their first sensations of profound relief, Mr. Perrin and his Countess felt a warm glow, not only of pleasure but of pride. That their Mansion should have been selected as the temporary residence of this remarkable visitor was very gratifying indeed. Their gratification was increased when they learned the implicit confidence which Comrade Kookski had placed in their loyalty and discretion.

"But why didn't you come to the front door?" asked Lady Twickenham. "You would have saved two flower pots; and I suppose you smashed the lock of the conservatory door getting in."

"The agents of your Government, they know I have landed in England!" explained Comrade Kookski in urgent, dramatic accents, "They may perhaps watch your house. I do not know, but I take no risks! I come by night. I climb your fence. I open your conservatory door by a kick! That was before you come, or

you would hear. But you hear the flower pots! It was so dark, and there was so many pot. I was as careful as I could be, but I bump two of them. When my money comes from Moscow I will pay for them. I trust you to welcome me, lovely lady, and allow the bill to remain till I get my money!"

The simple candour of this product of the rebirth of Russia charmed the Countess. She was, moreover, a confirmed admirer of proper looking men, and Mr. Kookski was tall and graceful, agreeable of countenance despite his shaggy beard, and possessed of a surprising gallantry of manner.

"We won't think of allowing you to pay, my dear Comrade," she assured him. "Fortunately we are not the kind of Communists who believe in giving away all one's money before we know how it is going to be spent, and the flower pots are a trifle, I assure you."

"You are so good as you are beautiful!" replied the Comrade, with another profound bow.

Meanwhile Mr. Perrin had been gradually collecting his thoughts. He now uttered the first of them.

"Won't you have a sandwich, Mr.—er—Kookski?"

"Oh, you musn't call him 'Mister,' Robert," cried Lady Twickenham. "It should either be 'Comrade' or just plain 'Kookski'; shouldn't it Comrade?"

"Till one has shed blood it should just be 'Comrade,'" their visitor explained. "After that it can be Kookski, if you prefer. You can call me either."

"Then he has cut somebody's throat—probably lots of them!" said the Countess aside to her husband, as she passed him to examine the tray. "How perfectly thrilling!"

She glanced at the contents of the tray, and turned to Withers. He had moved discreetly into the background, his gun under his arm, and awaited developments by the door.

"Withers, Comrade Kookski will be spending a few days here. Get the pink room ready for him!"

"Very good, my lady."

"He will want—let me see, what will he want? Comrade, do you ever have a bath? I mean the sort of thing we have in England—hot water don't you know, and soap—if you care to use it?"

The Comrade signified that he sometimes bathed.

"Then the usual towels and so on, Withers. Would you like anything particular to sleep in, Comrade, or do you just—oh, of course you mentioned that you had brought Pyjamas. Then that's all right, Withers. Shaving? But, of course you've got a beard. And you sleep in a bed in the usual way, I suppose? I never saw a Russian bed, but I suppose you don't mind lying on top as we do? We could easily put you on the floor if you prefer it—or am I thinking of Arabs and tents?"

Comrade Kookske replied that he was ready on this occasion to sleep in the English fashion.

"Then you'll be called at eight in the usual way. If you hear a knock on the door, it won't be the police, and the man who comes in will only be Withers. You mustn't feel nervous if he takes out your clothes to brush. Oh, by the way, Withers, don't iron his trousers whatever you do! I never heard of a Comrade with a crease."

"Beg pardon," said Withers in a low confidential voice, "but would your ladyship like me to bring Mr.—er—the gentleman tea in the morning? I have 'eard as vodka is the popular drink in Russia."

"Have we got any vodka, Withers?"

"No, my lady, but I could try him with kümmel. He might not notice the difference; not at that hour in the morning."

She turned to the Comrade. "We generally give visitors a cup of tea when we call them in the morning. It is brought in, you know, and you drink it by yourself. It isn't a public meal. But if you would like something a little stronger—more like what you are used to—Withers suggests kümmel, or would you prefer a mixture? Withers, what have you got to mix with kümmel?"

"I shall have tea please, lady!" said the Comrade. "Later in the day perhaps kümmel. For example, this is later in the day."

Comrade Kookski shed his brightest smile upon his hosts as he made this suggestion. They took the hint with alacrity.

"Bring some at once, Withers," commanded the Countess, "in a wine glass. But only half full," she added in a whisper. "We don't know how strong his head is yet."

"I have an idea that one of their national dishes is something in the nature of a sausage roll," added Mr. Perrin. "If you have anything resembling sausage rolls bring them too, Withers."

While awaiting his informal supper, Com-

rade Kookski related several interesting facts that threw quite a new light both on Soviet methods and the vigilance of the British police. It appeared that his mission to England was of the most secret nature and related to schemes of the highest importance. He alone had been entrusted with the full details of the stupendous project which was shortly to stagger the whole civilized world, and he modestly admitted that this undoubtedly indicated the very high appreciation of his qualities felt by the colossal brains that controlled the destinies of his country.

On the other hand, the compliment carried heavy responsibilities, and the injunctions laid upon him were exceedingly strict. For instance, he was prohibited under the heaviest penalties from speaking his native language, or even appearing to understand it. This, he confessed, was the hardest part of his task. He moved Lady Twickenham exceedingly by his plaintive regrets that he was not allowed even to sing in the melodious cadences of his beloved native tongue. The object of the precaution, he explained, was to prevent anybody in England from having the least suspicion of his real nationality.

"In that case," suggested the Countess, "I

should certainly get rid of those boots. They are worn in all the Russian ballets and are quite the fashion for English girls. Everybody knows what they are."

Comrade Kookski thanked her for the suggestion, but shook his head over it very dubiously. The fact was that he had specially provided himself with these boots in order to create the proper atmosphere, and felt exceedingly proud of them; and moreover he had given his others in part payment.

"I should not like to part with them," he replied. "It would be to break the last link with my native land!"

There was obviously no arguing with a sentiment as strong as this. It appeared, besides, that the quite extraordinary vigilance of the English police would necessitate Comrade Kookski's remaining in seclusion for a few days at least, so that there would be nobody to see the boots in any case.

At this point the capable Mr. Withers returned to inform her ladyship that a little cold supper was now prepared for their visitor in the dining room, and the party adjourned thither. It was when passing out of the room that Lady Twickenham noticed that the Com-

rade's left sleeve was covered with whitening of some kind.

"You have rubbed your sleeve against something in the conservatory," she said. "Withers, get a clothes brush!"

"No, no!" protested Comrade Kookski. "It is just a little memorandums that I make to remind myself before I came in."

And then the Countess noticed that the markings seemed to resemble numerous repetitions of the letter E.

"About who to get rid of?" she cried. "How exciting!"

She was further thrilled to hear the Comrade gently sigh.

"He has some regrets left," she thought. "But what a delightfully bloodthirsty creature he is!"

Their visitor did full justice to his supper. His conversation was somewhat impeded by his appetite, but he said enough to increase still further the good impression he had produced.

"Remember, my dear Kookski," the Countess reminded him last thing before they parted, "if you find your boots have disappeared in the morning, they are only being cleaned. You don't mind having some of your

things cleaned sometimes, do you? Good-night!"

It was only when he had reached the pink room that Comrade Kookski remembered an important omission.

"Gad, I clean forgot to give Valentine a leg up! And I wonder where the girl is?"

## CHAPTER VIII

### BERYL

C OMRADe KOOKSKI'S conduct at the breakfast table charmed his hostess. She said of herself, with candid apology, that she had unfortunately turned communist too late to rid herself of all her foolish old-fashioned prejudices. She loved violence in its proper place, but at table it seemed to her superfluous. "I am so afraid of the poor dears choking themselves," she explained. "Of course I know my father had no business to be a duke; still, he did clean his nails, and he did his spitting in private, and personally I think it was pleasanter." On the other hand, now that the thrills of the hunting field and the risks of the divorce court were things of the past, Communism undoubtedly provided infinitely more excitement than usually fell to the lot of a stout, middle-aged dowager peeress.

Her guest seemed to be the most satisfactory result of her new creed she had yet met. He had evidently washed as recently as that

very morning. He ate and drank without any sound audible across the table, and with no damage either to the cloth or the china. Yet he expressed the fieriest sentiments, and dropped the most exciting hints of deeds too horrible to be related in presence of her husband. As for his own personal adventures, they were remarkable, even judged by a Russian standard.

"Have I been in prison, do you ask me, lady?" said he, helping himself to marmalade quite as though he knew what it was. "Ten times already, and I hope to be much more! The first time it was for a man which I killed. The second time, it was two men. The third time only just one man. The fourth time for a girl, which I will not mention what I did."

"Oh do, Comrade!" cried the Countess. "You musn't really think so much of my husband's feelings. Robert, aren't you nearly ready to go and smoke your cigarette?"

"Presently, my dear," said Mr. Perrin. "I am too interested in Mr—er—Comrade Kookski's quite—er—remarkable—"

"Yes, I know," interrupted his countess, "but don't look shocked then if Kookski tells us about this girl. What did you do to her, Comrade?"

Comrade Kookski shook his head with an air of sombre recollection.

"It is too painful. I would please rather tell you of my other crimes. The next two times I will omit, for it was two other girls."

"This is really too tantalizing!" cried the Countess. "Do please, Robert, go to the library!"

"Presently, my dear," repeated Mr. Perrin mildly, "presently."

By this time Lady Twickenham had discovered that her second venture, though not what one would call a forcible man, exhibited at times much the same quality of passive resistance as a heavy corpse. She shrugged her shoulders and said to their guest in a confidential voice:

"You can tell me about that afterwards."

All this time a question had been troubling the Comrade. Mr. Perrin had referred incidentally to his son, who it appeared, was at present attending the University of Cambridge. But there had been never a word of a daughter. "Where the deuce is she?" said the Comrade to himself. A fourth place was laid at table, and this gave him a gleam of hope. But behind the beard of Kookski, Francis Es-

sington was growing a trifle bored by the enthusiastic countess. The hour was already approaching ten, and if Valentine's bewitcher was going to appear at all, he considered the time was overdue.

The door opened, a shrill whistle sounded, and half of a girl's figure appeared. There followed a pattering of feet and four little dogs rushed into the room. Whether it was Comrade Kookski's boots or his beard that they found most stimulating was difficult to say, but certainly there arose on the instant a din of barking, yelping and growling through which a high-pitched voice cried:

"Damn you, shut up you fools! Flora, you little bitch, get under that chair! Kick them, Kookski! It'll serve them right."

Kookski launched a kick, the ring-leader Flora fled to her mistress' chair, and that young lady advanced with outstretched hand.

"How are you?" she said. "Good-morning, Dad. Good-morning, Com. Any letters for me? Oh damn, what a dud lot!"

Miss Beryl bore out her admirer's description. She was small, slim, dark, and dazzlingly, wickedly pretty. At that moment she was scarcely in her softest mood; which was sufficiently explained by the fact that she had

only returned from a dancing club at five in the morning and was still a trifle fatigued. A succession of such nights accounted for her pallor and the black rims to her eyes, yet these made her none the less attractive. Her nod to her father was merely patronizing. Her stepmother (whom she styled "Com" as an affectionate short for Comradess) received a flicker of smile. And then she stared very frankly at their new visitor. It was clear she felt a little dubious.

"Is it permitted in England to tell a young lady how beautiful she is?" he inquired.

"How very prettily put!" cried the countess, laughing. "I really do think all these revolutions and things in Russia have been a great success!"

Beryl's dark eyes flashed a glance at their guest, which had no dubiety in it. He smiled back and said, with a gallant bow:

"I see it is permitted, so I tell you, Mademoiselle!"

"That French touch—how effective!" exclaimed the countess. "I didn't know they still kept it up in Russia. Really, we must have a Soviet here, Robert! I've often thought of starting one; only one needs some sort of an instructor, and they might have sent such an

impossible person. Kookski, will you tell us how to begin?"

"Of course, he will!" said Beryl. "I'll consult him after breakfast."

Again she exchanged glances with the Comrade.

"It will take a long time to explain it all to you, Madamoiselle," said he. "But if we can be private and not interrupted—"

"Rather," said Beryl. "We'll come up to my room. There's a bed in it but I daresay you won't mind that."

Mr. Perrin emitted a strange sound. It resembled a gasp more than anything else known to science.

"Oh damn!" said his daughter. "I forgot dad was listening. He's the only person in this house you can shock, Kookski. He believes in free love and trigamy and all the rest of it theoretically, but his father made his pile in hats, and I think they must have been mostly clergymen's wide-awakes. Anyhow there is something in his past which dad can't get rid of. But I am guaranteed unshockable. You can tell me all the latest Russian news."

"I want to consult Comrade Kookski myself," cut in the Countess with a note of tartness. "You can consult him afterwards."

"All right, Com. Only don't keep him too long and don't make him love you too much. You'll keep a little love for me, Kookski, won't you?"

Miss Beryl had entirely recovered from her fatigue by this time. Her eyes played upon Comrade Kookski as they had played upon Valentine Mead, and her laugh rang out, girlish and clear.

Again the Comrade bowed.

"All that the one beautiful lady does not take I shall give to the other beautiful lady," he replied tactfully.

He added a smile thrown in the direction of the younger lady, which possibly exceeded the limitations of tact. It was answered by one equally warm, and for a moment Mr. Essington's new-found conscience pricked him. It pricked him sharply, suddenly, but not very deeply.

"We will talk practically all the time about Valentine," he said to himself, "and I am sure dear Eve would approve of that! It will be to-day's good deed."

## CHAPTER IX

### THE FIRST CONSULTATION

THE first consultation was held in the library.

"I suppose," said the Countess, "that we *ought* to begin by dividing up the silver with the servants; but really what *would* they do with it? No one is a keener Communist than I am. I'd simply adore being put in prison. I have only been in a prison once in my life, and that was to see my poor Uncle Fred. That side of the family are all either criminals or lunatics. I forget what the dear thing was in for that time. Anyhow, I'd love to go to prison. And think of the fun of escaping! My poor dear cousin Bertie was shot trying to escape from a German prison. At least his friends say it was that. One does hear such horrid stories. Some people didn't like Bertie. He used to train my poor, dear cousin Charlie's horses for him, and there were funny stories about that too. However, I do draw the line at giving my teaspoons to my maid! I'm sure

I give her enough things as it is. So we won't divide anything up. I don't want *that* kind of Soviet."

"I see," said the comrade gravely. "You would like the other kind, which keeps everything to itself?"

"Exactly, my dear Kookski. How clever and understanding you are! Isn't he sympathetic, Robert?"

Mr. Perrin made another curious sound; like a man who might be going to say something in the future. What it was will never be known. His countess rattled on:

"I suppose there ought to be some sort of equality, oughtn't there? I mean about the servants and that sort of thing. Strictly speaking, I suppose one oughtn't to keep servants; but then I never believe in overdoing things. Nobody is more communistic than we are, really; are they, Robert? At the same time even among the early Christians, well, there were differences of opinion, weren't there? Oh, but, of course, Russians aren't Christians, are they? Not nowadays anyhow. And that's a thing we really could do! We could give up our religion entirely! We could be as thorough as you like there, Kookski. What do you say?"

"If it would not be too much sacrifice, dear lady."

"Oh, Robert would never notice the difference. He is an intellectual, you know. I've known him forget to dress for dinner! By the way, ought one to dress for dinner now? Well, we can consider that afterwards. Beryl isn't religious at all. I am quite worried about her sometimes. I myself am of course in a kind of way. Well, naturally how could one help it, seeing that we are told— But of course you aren't interested in that kind of thing. However, I don't mind giving it up a bit. Anything for the good of the Cause!"

Comrade Kookski expressed his deep gratification, and the lady continued:

"Class differences of course have been abolished in this house already, so there is nothing more we can do there. Withers is a thorough Socialist—I mean Communist; or anyhow he will be as soon as I tell him we have now gone *quite* over to the left wing. Robert hesitated for a long time; in fact until I married him, but Socialism has got so respectable; quite middle-class in fact. One really wants something more stimulating! And now that you have come we have quite decided, haven't we, Robert?"

Again Mr. Perrin made a premonitory sound, but again his countess resumed before anything further occurred.

"We can count on Withers absolutely. He is such a quiet, obedient man. You can put him down as a really red communist, Comrade. I'll tell him what is wanted. And he has the other servants under his thumb; so there will be no trouble with them. They will all turn atheists or anarchists or anything Withers tells them to. Besides, they know when they are well off! They are far too comfortable here to make a fuss about giving up a few ideas, which after all they never really held. The men think of nothing but running after the girls, and the girls nothing but being run after by the men. Goodness knows what doesn't go on! I often say that the lower classes seem to have no morals at all. By the way, isn't it rather inconsistent to go on paying them wages? And yet the poor things must have something to buy their spattees and fur coats with. Perfectly ridiculous in girls of their station! Still, I hate to disappoint people, don't you? And if they have got into the way of it—well, what can one do?"

All this while Comrade Kookski had been listening with an air of grave attention. It

appeared, however, that he had also been thinking, and he now made the further suggestion: "We will need also a subscription, lovely lady. A Soviet always has much subscription."

"What an excellent idea! Who will subscribe?"

"You will, lovely lady; and your intellectual husband. He has much money."

"Oh, Robert can quite well afford it. I'll see that he gives a handsome subscription. And I could give a little perhaps too. Nobody could be a keener Communist, but I'm not nearly as rich as people suppose, and my expenses are literally awful! If you only saw my last dressmaker's bill! However, we will certainly have a subscription, my dear Comrade. But what will it be used for?"

"Propaganda! To make much more Communist!"

"Oh how splendid! Yes, I quite approve of that. And who will keep the subscription?

"I will, lovely lady. Do not be anxious. I have much experience of subscriptions."

"How fortunate! Well, then, I'll make Robert pay you a really good subscription this morning. You hear that, Robert?"

Again the beginnings of a murmur arose from Mr. Perrin. This time Comrade Kookski continued the conversation.

"There must also be a committee to rule the Soviet."

"Oh, of course, they do have them, don't they? Who would you suggest?"

"I would suggest that the females be one Soviet and the males be another. The beautiful Miss Perrin and the lovely Lady Twickenham should rule the woman Soviet."

"What an excellent arrangement!" cried the Countess. "I would be President and Beryl Vice-President, or something like that, I suppose you mean. Yes, that will do beautifully. And what about the men?"

"Me myself and Mr. Withers would rule the men Soviet."

A curious choking sound, almost suggestive of protest, came from the direction of Mr. Perrin, but it was peremptorily stifled by his Countess.

"Certainly that will be the best plan. You know, Robert, you are far too intellectual to rule a Soviet. People like you simply get massacred. Yes, I think we can call that settled, Comrade."

"Secured the cellar!" said the Comrade to himself, and, making a profound bow first to the lovely lady and then to her husband, he repaired to his second consultation in a very agreeable frame of mind.

## CHAPTER X

### THE SECOND CONSULTATION

THE second consultation took place in an altogether different atmosphere. Miss Beryl's room was a large apartment decorated with black and orange stripes and zig-zags, a few pictures splashed by her futurist friends, a great many photographs and ash-trays, a luxurious chair or two, and a large bed with a ravishing suit of pyjamas laid across it. She did not sleep in the bed, or wear the pyjamas, but she had admired just such an effort in a recent theatrical sensation, and her bed had been purchased and introduced into her sitting room. The pyjamas, she said with the wickedest smile, were a present, but nobody had yet discovered the donor. Literal, dull, stupid accuracy, it may be added, was not Miss Beryl's weakness.

She herself looked bewitching. Possibly it was only her attitude, cross-legged on the edge of the bed, that made her skirt seem even

shorter than at breakfast, but she had certainly added a touch of something to her complexion. She was smoking a cigarette and the four small dogs were grouped about her. They barked as before, and were rebuked in the same straightforward terms.

Comrade Kookski bowed very low as he entered, and shuffled across to the easy chair his hostess indicated by saucily pointing her toe. The shuffle represented his conception of how a bearded comrade from Moscow, accustomed in his youth to the knout, probably would move across a lady's boudoir.

"Hullo, my dear man, what's the matter?" inquired Miss Beryl, observing his gait with surprise. "You aren't blotto already, are you?"

Kookski straightened himself and trod a little more firmly.

"It is so dazzling!" he explained, his eyes rolling round the room with what he intended as an expression of awe, and resting, as it were automatically, on the pyjamas.

"What, those?" smiled Beryl. "Would you like me to put them on?"

"You are too beautiful as it is!" sighed the Comrade, dropping into the cushions.

"Not compared with Russian girls surely?"

"No Russian girl is so lovely a sylph. She would not go into that pyjama!"

"How do you know?" she laughed.

"How can I, except I have seen them try?" replied the Comrade with an engaging smile, and then hurriedly endeavoured to raise the conversation to a higher level. "We have now made a Soviet, just like Russia!"

"What fun! Do tell me about it! It means you needn't get married, doesn't it; and nobody is respectable and dud and that sort of thing?"

"It means you are as wicked as you are pretty, and cannot be trusted to be told any more," replied Comrade Kookski incautiously.

He was rewarded by this relapse from strict business by the presence, a few moments later, of Miss Beryl on the arm of his chair. In this position their conversation quickly became friendly and intimate indeed.

"I suppose you have a wife or two at home?" said she.

"Oh, just a few. By law we are only allowed five."

"Rot! You haven't married one of them, I'm perfectly certain."

"I call them wife because I know no other English word."

"Oh, I know what you mean. But do tell me honestly. Do they really have limits?"

He shrugged his shoulders as a foreigner should.

"It is much like your speed limit in England. We have a five-wife speed, and sometimes there is a trap, as you have here, with a police to catch you if you exceed. They fine fifty rouble for every wife above the limit, and take your licence for a month."

Beryl stared at him with her black eyes very wide open indeed.

"You aren't pulling my leg?"

The Comrade raised his hands in protest.

"I did not touch your leg, I swear! I have five wife already!"

"Oh, I didn't mean literally. But honestly do you mean to say they have reached that length in Moscow? I never saw that mentioned in any book."

"It is not mentioned in books. It is a secret which I only tell to you to show you why I admire and yet am so modest. Of course I might kill one and just have four. Then there might be a vacancy. But that would not be nice."

She gazed down at him from the arm of the chair, a little horrified, still more fascinated. The Comrade's well-meant efforts to indicate

that his affections were already engaged were not producing quite the effect he intended. Beryl lived for sensations, and this tall, handsome, mysterious stranger, with his lurid past and *congerie* of lady victims, was the most exciting thing she had ever met.

"You are perfectly revolting!" she exclaimed; yet her eyes flashed a different message.

"You are perfectly ravishing!" he replied; and then hastily added, "But I must now go to arrange the Soviet."

"Well, if you are tired of my society, go!" she pouted.

Comrade Kookski remained in the easy chair; but he made another brave attempt to change the subject.

"Would you like some more fact about Russia: yes? When I was a boy I had a sledge to run on the snow, and my brother he had a sledge likewise, and there was much wolves—"

"Oh, I don't want to hear that sort of thing!" she interrupted. "Tell me about these 'wives,' as you call them. Which is your favourite? What's her name, to begin with?"

"Her name," he replied with happy inspiration, "is Evangelinski."

"Is she dark or fair?"

"She is fair," he confessed.

"Tell me some more about her!"

"Well, she is rather tall; slender anyhow, so that she seems rather tall. Her head would come on my shoulder—or just above? No, I do not know that she is tall; not too tall anyhow, just the right height! And her hair is parted to one side. And she is the politest woman in Eng—I mean in Russia! Ah, but I talk of her too much!"

She looked at him curiously.

"You are rather smitten with that one!" she laughed. "No wonder I have no chance!"

For a moment he met her eyes, and then hurriedly jumped up.

"I must see Mr. Withers! He is on the Soviet too. Thank you, beautiful lady, for this interview—"

"Oh, but we'll be seeing lots of each other! You must tell me more about Evangelinski."

It was only as he closed the door behind him that he remembered a second important omission.

"Dash it, I didn't say a word about Valentine Mead!"

## CHAPTER XI

### MR. WITHERS

THE distinguished visitor was presented to his colleague on the Soviet by the Countess herself.

"This is Withers—or should I say Comrade Withers now? Which would you prefer, Withers?"

"I leaves it entirely to your ladyship," replied Mr. Withers with grave politeness. "Personally speaking, I 'ave been Withers all my life, and my father before me, and unless your ladyship 'as a decided preference I should sooner remain Withers."

"What nice feelings he has, hasn't he?" exclaimed her ladyship with enthusiasm. "It shows that the old spirit of England hasn't died out, doesn't it? I remember my poor dear Uncle Algie had a butler just like that—the most faithful creature you ever saw! But you are a strong Communist now, Withers, aren't you?"

"Very, my lady," replied Withers respect-

fully, "regular Bolshie, if I may venture to say so."

"Isn't he splendid!" cried her ladyship. "I told you there would be no difficulty at all about Withers."

This was merely a formal introduction. No further business was done that morning, as her ladyship desired Comrade Kookski's company on a tour of the conservatories, and afterwards begged his assistance in solving a cross-word puzzle. They were joined by Beryl, who again perched herself on the arm of his chair and was very kind and friendly indeed. Before luncheon Comrade Kookski charmed his hostess by again retiring to wash his hands, and even brush his hair.

"He really is the most delightful combination," she said to her step-daughter, "so rabid and yet with so many of the instincts of a gentleman! I can't help suspecting he must have been the illegitimate son of a prince or something."

When he appeared at table, they were vastly intrigued to see that he had once more covered his left sleeve with hieroglyphics in chalk. This safeguard kept the Comrade's thoughts faithful for a time, but after he had been for

an after-luncheon walk in the park with Beryl and the four little dogs, not even the presence of the lump of chalk in his pocket, and a surreptitious freshening up of the symbols proved a perfect barrier. More than one of Beryl's glances penetrated far into his defences.

"And, hang it, I never seem to get a chance of bringing Valentine into the picture!" he said to himself desperately. "This is beginning to be the devil and all."

As soon as he came in he informed the ladies with a very serious air that it was imperative he should retire and spend the remainder of the afternoon in consultation with his colleague in the back regions of the Mansion.

"It's the only safe place," he said to himself, "provided old Withers doesn't introduce me to the maids. There are limits to what a bit of chalk and a tender recollection can do!"

He was conducted by Comrade Withers to a small but exceedingly comfortable sitting-room, where a fire burned cheerfully and a wineglass and tumbler appeared almost instantaneously upon the table.

"Would you prefer a glass of port, sir, a whisky and soda, or a cocktail?" his fellow Bolshevik inquired deferentially.

"Is it forbidden to have them all?" smiled Comrade Kookski. "I will begin, please, with a cocktail, Comrade."

Comrade Withers smiled back; yet it was the smile rather of a butler than a Comrade.

"I think I can recommend our cocktails, sir," said he. "I mix them myself, not believing in the ready-made variety, sir."

"You have the makings, Comrade, of a great revolutionary," said his guest with high approval.

The cocktail was mixed and presented.

"But surely you are going to join me, Comrade?"

Comrade Withers coughed dubiously.

"If you prefer me to, sir," he said apologetically.

Comrade Kookski looked at his colleague alertly.

"Damn it, Comrade," said he, "you are devilish obsequious for a red-hot Bolshie. I observe for instance that, contrary to the last edict from Moscow, you address me as 'sir'."

Comrade Withers coughed again. It was evident that he was a little embarrassed.

"Beg pardon, sir, but should it be 'my lord'?" he inquired in a confidential voice.

Comrade Kookski touched his beard and

glanced down at his boots. His disguise seemed to him complete.

"Who then think you that I am, Comrade?" he inquired.

Mr. Withers smiled indulgently.

"Beg pardon, my lord, but really—well—I 'ave had some experience of Society, and your lordship's appearance is very creditable indeed, but I knows the real gentry when I sees 'em. Bless your 'eart, my lord, I knew it was a member of the aristocracy 'aving a frolic before you was in the 'ouse 'alf an hour!"

Mr. Essington heaved a sigh of relief.

"This saves me a deuced lot of sweat!" said he. "Talking like a dashed Dago all the time, is a bit of a strain. Only for God's sake, don't give me away, Withers!"

"You can trust me absolutely, my lord." Mr. Withers assured him earnestly. "If your lordship only knew what a pleasure it is to see a real gentleman in this 'ouse, you would understand my feelings."

"And what about Bolshevism, Comrade?"

Comrade Withers' smile was ambiguity itself. It might have signified anything. He replied slowly and in carefully chosen language.

"Well, my lord, I have long held political

opinions which, in a manner of speaking, might be termed advanced. Progress is progress, I have often said to myself, and there is no getting away from it. The lower classes, my lord, likes to 'ave a vote now and then, and where's the 'arm? But 'ands off the Church of England! Socialism is mostly talk, and that's good for the public 'ouses. So why not is what I says to myself. Communism is the fashion with her ladyship at present, as your lordship will have noticed for yourself. Being in her ladyship's service, it is not becoming of me to contradict her. She finds it 'ealthy—not 'ad one of her usual colds in the 'ead since she took to it. Probably it's the excitement, my lord, that keeps her too 'appy to catch cold. Anyhow that's what you might call quite a tidy little score already, and no wickets down so far. And talking of that, did your lordship attend the last Test Match?"

"Unfortunately," said Mr. Essington, also with a slightly ambiguous expression, "I was confined to the house at the time. Like her ladyship, I had a little trouble with my head. And apropos of trouble, Withers, I have finished my cocktail. Yes, thank you, another of the same."

Their conversation thereafter proceeded

along the pleasantest lines possible. With his usual delicacy of feeling, Mr. Essington refrained from confessing that he did not actually belong to the peerage. "It would disappoint my honest friend considerably," he thought. "Besides, if he gets it thoroughly into his head that I am Lord Damn-it-all, he is the less likely to confound me with Francis Essington if he should happen to hear of that individual." Mr. Withers, on his part, felt a justifiable pride in his familiarity with the aristocracy and their ways, and by the time he had consumed a second cocktail himself, he was treating his distinguished visitor with a frank confidence that reflected credit on them both.

"You don't think any of the others have spotted me?" inquired Mr. Essington.

Mr. Withers shook his head with a superior smile.

"They 'aven't and they won't, my lord. Mr. Perrin wouldn't tumble to it, not if you was to start talking Scotch to him instead. He wouldn't notice the difference! What brains he has, they're all shut up in his 'ead, my lord, so to speak. He doesn't use 'em, as it were, for or'ney purposes. Being a socialist suits him down to the ground."

"And her ladyship?"

"Her ladyship's intellect is different, my lord. Her brains, in a manner of speaking, is always out of her head. They're a bit uncontrolled, in fact. Excitement is 'er kind of cocktail, and she likes it early and often. So long as her waist would 'old an arm round it comfortable, it was usually a gentleman; mostly" (here Mr. Withers' voice became very respectful indeed) "a nobleman, my lord. Speaking from private information—his Grace's valet being brother-in-law of my cousin—there was no doubt about the hatmosphere being uncommon 'ot in that case. Your lordship will reckernise the allusion no doubt. It was frequently discussed in the 'ighest circles, I believe. If her lady's maid hadn't been packed off to Australia with five 'undred quid in her pocket—where she has since done very well with a Turkish Bath, I've heard—there'd have been a bit of a *causé célèbraté*, as the French say. But there wasn't no evidence after that. Oh, her ladyship didn't have to turn Bolshie to get excitement, so long as her figure 'eld out!"

"You give me some very interesting sidelights on the frailties of my Order," observed Mr. Essington. "And now to descend a trifle from these exalted circles, what about Miss Beryl?"

Mr. Withers shot him a very peculiar glance. It was evident that he held decided opinions regarding that young lady.

"Miss Beryl——" he began in a confidential voice.

There came the sound of a door opening in the passage outside, and then a scampering of little feet.

"Kookski!" cried a fresh young voice.  
"Where are you?"

"She's 'ot on the scent!" whispered Mr. Withers mysteriously.

The door of the room was flung open and Miss Beryl looked in.

"Come on, Comrade!" she said. "You've sovietted with Withers long enough!"

As Comrade Kookski arose from his easy chair, he surreptitiously inscribed another symbol on his sleeve.

"Gad, I hope this chalk holds out!" he said to himself.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE TELEGRAM

THAT night Mr. Essington sat down before his bedroom fire (a luxury permitted by the new Soviet, for the sake of the poor miners), and soliloquized strenuously for nearly three minutes. This was a long period of silent communion for him, and as usual it ended in prompt, decided action.

"Shall I bolt before that girl corrupts my morals? They're damned new and the things don't seem to have set yet. I won't guarantee them to last much longer. But then what becomes of my good deed? I haven't done a hand's turn for poor Valentine yet, and, though I'd scarcely know the boy from Cupid if I saw him again, one doesn't like to let down a pal. Besides, a fellow so desperately in love with one girl as I am, surely oughtn't to have to run away from another! It argues a lack of confidence in one's own affections. Damn it, I'll stay and I'll wire for Valentine at once!"

He leapt up, seized a telegraph form from

the paper-case on the writing table and sat for a moment with his pencil poised.

"He must give some reason for coming. Message from Moscow of course. But one can't explain that in a wire. I'll merely drop a hint and then meet him before he gets to the house."

In the flowing hand, artistic to look at, but the despair of his friends who had to read it, Mr. Essington dashed off his telegram.

Come Beech House to-morrow 12 o'clock most important give all directions on meeting you.

Major Blank.

He read it over and bethought him that the wire could only be sent off next morning, whereupon he altered "to-morrow" into "to-day."

He laid it on his dressing table with a brief note for Withers.

"Please send this off first thing. Don't tell anyone I have sent a wire."

Valentine's coming must appear to be spontaneous, he decided; hence the caution.

He began to undress and then paused.

"Twelve o'clock is too late," he said to himself. "The Lord knows what may happen between breakfast and noon! He must come

sooner. I suppose a fellow in the Guards can get away whenever he likes."

Thereupon he made his final correction, by scoring out the 2 of the 12 and putting 1 beyond it, and ten minutes later was in bed with an easy mind.

The next part of his admirable programme had included a little preliminary talk with Beryl on the subject of her admirer, in the course of which he proposed to drop the most intriguing hints of Valentine's efforts on behalf of the Cause, and the high esteem in which he was held at Soviet Headquarters. But the Fates seemed to be steadily against him. Beryl came down particularly late for breakfast, and when she did appear she looked so ravishing and sparkled so mischievously that he judged it safer to keep away from her. He attached himself to the Countess, but this was but a brief respite. She and Mr. Perrin were booked to go down by train in the morning to the baronial seat of another ardent convert to Communism, where an intellectual luncheon party had been arranged. Lady Twickenham had been anxious to bring Comrade Kookski with her. There were going to be several distinguished Revolutionaries present, with an expert knowledge of Russia, she assured him,

and she promised him a thoroughly interesting time. The Comrade, however, was quite firm. His mission was as secret as it was important, and he was under the strictest injunctions he said, to discuss nothing with anybody, except his lovely and accomplished hostess.

At ten-thirty Mr. Perrin and she departed to catch their train, and Comrade Kookski slipped out into the grounds, and kept himself carefully out of sight till eleven o'clock was approaching. Then he made his way down the drive and posted himself near the gates, protected by a large tree trunk from the side of the house. Eleven o'clock arrived, and then eleven-ten and eleven-twenty and still the gates stood closed. It had never occurred to Mr. Essington (who was probably the most confirmed optimist in England) that Valentine would fail to turn up, or even be seriously late, and he felt very disconcerted indeed. And then he heard a whistle and a chorus of yelping barks. The sounds were coming down the drive.

"This is really beginning to be more than human nature can endure!" he said to himself as he stepped forth from behind his tree and bowed profoundly.

"Where on earth have you been?" she cried,

and it seemed as though her temper was a trifle ruffled.

"I meditate upon my mission, beautiful lady," said he.

"Well come and tell me your meditations!"

He glanced at his watch. It was approaching the half hour by now, and with a sigh he set out with her for a walk. So long as they walked, he felt there was some degree of safety, but the walk at last came to an end, and she led him up to her room. He pled the necessity for further meditation, but not very vigorously. In fact a look of resignation, as of one who feels it useless to strive with Destiny, appeared once or twice in his eyes, though it was quickly replaced by a firier flash after he had surreptitiously glanced down at his sleeve. A few chalk marks were still visible there.

"I've just heard from a friend of yours, Kookski," she said with a laugh, and tossed him a letter. "Read that, and tell me what to say."

He opened the letter and read:

Dear Beryl,—

It seems ages since I saw you last. Won't you come and lunch with me, or anyhow have tea? What about Thursday? Or failing that would Friday suit you? Or Saturday? Or Sunday if you have no other day, or Monday or Tuesday? In fact any day will suit

me. Do come! Either phone, or wire, or write. I do hope you will come, Beryl. I have such a lot to say to you.

By the way I gave a man an introduction to your people the other day. He is a Russian and calls himself Major Blank, though he says frankly it isn't his real name. He seems a first rate chap and a keen socialist. In fact I suppose he is a Bolshevik really, so you will have a lot in common. I wonder if he has called yet. If he does I hope you will like him.

Do be sure to come either to lunch or tea, lunch for choice.

Yours very sincerely,

Valentine Mead.

"A very nice letter," said Comrade Kookski with an air of great sincerity. "He is such a nice young man himself. Oh, so charming a man! And a promising Bolshevik—yes, very promising!"

"Valentine Mead?" she laughed. "I think I see him! He may have stuffed you up, but I don't believe he is for an instant. And by the way, you have stuffed him up properly yourself, old Kookski! Major Blank! I like that!"

Her Comrade maintained the same unusual gravity.

"I was in much danger and that is why I give such a wrong name. Never before have I did such a thing, for a Russian Communist he is not allowed to tell nothing but the truth, unless on emergencies. But Comrade Mead

he was so brave! He did save me from my enemies! You must certainly go and have luncheon with him."

"I find life quite amusing enough at present without Valentine Mead's help, thank you," said she. "I may lunch with him later, but there is no hurry—is there?"

She added the question with the most intriguing flash of her eyes at him. But he remained solemn.

"Oh, yes, I think you should go the first day he asks. He will have something interesting to tell you. He is a most eager Bolshevik, I assure you, Miss Beryl!"

Miss Beryl pouted at him for a moment in silence. Then she leapt up and cried:

"Oh stop preaching, Kookski! I can't stand it. If you're going to be so damned solemn I'll have to wake you up!"

And with that she flung a cushion at his head. The comrade might have been a cricketer in his day from the dexterity with which he caught it and the quickness with which he flung it back. Beryl shrieked with mirth, the four dogs barked, and three or four times the cushion whizzed backwards and forwards across the room. There was so much noise

that they never heard the door open, and in its last journey, flying high over Comrade Kook-ski's head, the cushion struck an entering visitor full in the middle. At the same moment the voice of Withers announced:

"Mr. Mead!"

## CHAPTER XIII

### VALENTINE'S VISIT

THAT morning Marjorie was called to the telephone and heard her cousin Val's voice speaking in urgent tones.

"I say, Marjorie, I want to see you badly. I've got something I want to consult you about. Will you be in this morning if I come round as soon as I can get off duty?"

"What's it all about, Val?" she asked with a laugh in her pleasant voice. "It sounds most alarming! Anything to do with—?"

"Beryl? Yes, very much so. At least—well, you'll hear. I've got a most curious wire. However, I'll tell you all about it when I come round."

He came post haste and was shown into the library, where she was waiting alone. His hand was already in his pocket as he came into the room.

"Just look at this and tell me what you make of it, Marjorie!" said he, handing her a telegram.

It was Mr. Essington's effort of the night before, but unfortunately the Post Office officials had experienced the same difficulty as many others before them in deciphering that gentleman's handwriting. The telegram now read:

Come Beech House to dine 1.1 o'clock most important girl all devotion on meeting you.

Major Blank

"It is certainly rather curiously worded," she agreed. "But then of course Major Blank is a foreigner."

"Yes, I know. I've tried to make allowances for that. No doubt he means 'lunch' instead of 'dine.' But 1.1 seems a rum hour."

"Perhaps it's the way they put it in Russia."

"But presumably the Perrins have arranged the hour, not he. Of course old Perrin is chock full of fads and theories."

"Ah, that's it!" she cried. "It must be some weird theory of your new friends, Val. One can't expect people to be highbrow and socialistic and all the rest of it, and still remain quite like ordinary human beings. I mean," she added hastily, "that they don't want to be, and no doubt their own ways are much more up to date and intellectual and all that."

"Possibly it is some fad of old Perrin's," he admitted. "Yes, I suppose that must account for it. And do you suppose he means today?"

"Obviously, or he wouldn't have wired first thing in the morning, and he would have said the day if it had been any other."

"But why should he wire and not the Perrins?"

"He *has* wired, Val, and that's that."

"And then that bit about—well, obviously referring to Beryl. I wonder if really—" he broke off and looked at Marjorie.

"Of course, obviously!" she said with such immense heartiness that it was quite evident she must mean every word.

"I did write to her yesterday," he confessed, "but I don't think she could possibly have got my letter till this morning."

"Well, but the wire was only sent this morning."

"It would be quick work. Still, I suppose it's possible. And if the Major noticed anything, well, possibly—".

"That's it! He has seen the effect of your letter. Oh, I was sure she couldn't help—well, liking you very much, dear Val. In fact evidently it's more than that. Congratulations!"

He still looked a little dubious.

"He puts it in a funny way."

"Not for a foreigner. He simply means you will find her all devotion when you meet her. Evidently he has been working very hard in your interests, Val."

"Evidently. I say he is a dashed good chap anyhow! And now, I say, I must fly if I am to get down in time!"

"You are sure to stay to tea too," she said as she went with him to the front door. "But if by any chance you should get back in time to look in here, do come and tell me what has happened! I'll make a point of staying in from four o'clock on; and there will be nobody else at home."

"Right Oh! I'll look in if I can possibly manage it. Good-bye, Marjorie!"

She waved to him from the door step. He had come in his own car, and in a matter of seconds he had flashed round the first corner and was out of sight. Marjorie turned and came in with no sign of enthusiasm about her now, and she sighed as she shut the door.

At four o'clock sharp she heard a car drive up. She was at the window in an instant and saw Val get out. He had not the look of a triumphant lover, and at this sight her heart

gave a little leap. She chid herself sorely for it, but who can help what her heart does?"

He came in, greeted her briefly, and sat for a moment in silence. She knew him well, and waited without a word. Suddenly he laughed, but not at all hilariously.

"They mucked that wire at the post office," he said abruptly. "It should have been 'to-day' instead of 'to dine,' and 'girl' was a mistake too, and 'devotion'."

"Oh, Val! But how—"

"It was his beastly handwriting, he says. I suppose he isn't lying. And 1.1 ought to have been 11. That was the worst mistake—or perhaps it is just as well."

"But, Val, do tell me— What happened?"

"I got there about five minutes past one. The butler seemed to expect me and he took me straight upstairs. I suddenly realized he was taking me to her own sitting-room, and like a fool I began to wonder—but anyhow I didn't wonder long. There was a perfect hell—I mean deuce of a row going on. We could hear it through the door. Dogs barking, and Beryl yelling with laughter, and a man's voice. They were so hard at it they didn't see the door open, and the first thing I knew a cushion hit me full in the waistcoat."

"A cushion? Who threw it?"

"She did; but of course not at me. She was ragging with a tall man in a beard and top boots—a typical cut throat to look at. The butler announced my name and shut the door on me, or I should have cleared out at once. They didn't seem to want *me* there."

"But who was the man, Val?"

"Well, he seemed an utter stranger to me; I took no notice of him, but said 'how d'ye do' to Beryl, rather stiffly. She was laughing so much she could hardly speak, and obviously she didn't expect me. I never felt such a fool in my life!"

"Yes, but who was the man?"

"I'm just coming to that. He grinned at me all over and cried in a foreign accent,

"'Ah, my brave Comrade! And what is the news from Moscow?' And thereupon he started winking at me like a revolving light.

"I simply stared at him, and he seemed quite put about. Beryl was obviously a bit staggered. She said:

"'Don't you know him, Val?'

"'Not from Adam,' I said, and I dashed nearly said, 'Not from Satan,' that being the gentleman he most resembled.

"'Ah, I forgot, it is my disguise!' said the

man, and then he added very quickly, 'That is to say it is the way I was disguised before when I meet Comrade Mead! I am Major Blank, Comrade. You know me now?'

"Then I began to tumble to it. It actually was the Major rigged out like a Bolshie! And apparently the Perrins don't know he is disguised now. The way he has stuffed them up is perfectly astounding!"

"Are you sure he hasn't stuffed you up too, Val?"

"I thought so to begin with, and I am afraid I was a bit cool.

"'Yes,' I said, 'I see who it is now,' and simply turned away from him and asked Beryl, 'Didn't you expect me?'

"'Expect you?' she said. 'I got your letter if that's what you mean. But you invited *me* to come to lunch with *you*!'

"I was pretty sick by this time, and simply took the wire from my pocket and handed it to the Major.

"'Did you send that?' I asked.

"He evidently hadn't told Beryl, and for a moment it struck me he looked a bit of a fool. But by gad he can cover his tracks pretty quick!

"'Ah, they have made a mistake with the

hour. It should have been eleven o'clock!" he said; not a word about the other mistakes then, you'll observe. "But you have come—good! And now if you will excuse, Miss Beryl, Comrade Mead and I will go and talk of what news from Moscow he has brought and he shall then have luncheon with us."

"He evidently wanted to get me out of the room at once, and he told me quite candidly afterwards that he meant to cram me with a yarn about heroic exploits for the Communist cause, and God knows what other bunkum, and then I was to loose this off on Beryl!"

"But why?" asked Marjorie, her candid eyes very wide open indeed at this revelation of Major Blank's methods.

"Oh, it seems to have been a genuine enough brain wave. That's to say he meant well. The idea was that it would appeal to Beryl."

"You call that a brain wave!" exclaimed Marjorie. "And what do you call the kind of brain that waves like that?"

"Well, I quite admit the man must be a rum 'un."

"Only rum?" said she and added a significant, "H'm. And what happened next?"

"Beryl cut in and didn't seem to want him to go off with me. I don't know why. She

seemed to find everything so funny, she didn't want to lose any of it."

Marjorie threw one swift searching look at him and then turned her eyes away. He had never spoken of his enslaver in those accents before.

"I suppose it must have been rather funny," she said in an indifferent voice. "At least it would appear to some people, I suppose."

"It didn't to me, I can assure you! Besides, I didn't like the way she—" he broke off abruptly and changed it into, "the Major and she seemed to be pretty thick. I couldn't help noticing that."

"It does rather sound like it. Though of course in highbrow circles people may have cushion fights with comparative strangers. I don't know much about such people myself, you see. You ought to tell better."

He was silent for a moment. His thoughts seemed not to be pleasant. Then he said, "I don't know whether I was right or not. Perhaps I oughtn't to have felt so sick. Anyhow I refused to stop for lunch."

"What did Beryl say to that?" she asked quickly.

"She pouted a bit. I must say she looks top-

ping when she pouts! But honestly, Marjorie, I don't believe she minded two pence."

"And what about Major Blank?"

"He came down and saw me into my car. I must say he is an extraordinarily persuasive fellow. It was then that he told me about the Moscow idea, and he begged me not to despair, and give Beryl up. In fact he seemed very keen I should take her up to town with me and give the lunch there and then. He offered to invent some yarn that would induce her to come, but I didn't want a string of lies, even if they did make Beryl come."

"Quite right!" said Marjorie emphatically.

"But the Lord only knows what the man won't say to her now that I've gone. He really does seem genuinely anxious to help me. And apparently he is still going to try."

"By throwing cushions at her?"

"I'm afraid—well, you know she is very full of beans, and probably she began it. One must be fair, you know."

"Oh, yes,' said Marjorie, "I think you should certainly judge her fairly, Val. I mean, compare her with other people, and ask yourself what you would think of them, and—well, be perfectly fair, in fact. I think you do owe her

that. And Major Blank, too, you ought to judge him in the same way—quite fairly. Does he seem perfectly truthful and straightforward and likely to play quite straight with you—that's what you ought to ask about him. Certainly you ought to be quite fair to them both."

Val looked very serious.

"Of course if you put things in that way—"

"Oh, but I'm not putting them!" she hastened to explain. "I merely suggest that *you* should put them."

"I'll think it all over jolly carefully," he assured her. "Meanwhile the Major is still going to work hard for me—so he says; and anyhow we'll see what happens."

Her eyes had been very bright. They grew a little dimmer now.

"And you'll tell me, Val, as soon as it does happen?"

"Rather! I'll tell you everything. Good-bye, Marjorie. You're a perfect brick!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### ANOTHER TELEGRAM

THE gong sounded for luncheon as Comrade Kookski was returning from the front door, where he had watched Valentine's departure. He and Beryl lunched alone. While Withers was in the room she was audacious and the Comrade somewhat thoughtful. As soon as he left them she exclaimed,

"Well, Comrade, a penny for your thoughts! The five wives? Or just—what's her name? Eve—something or other!"

He started slightly and she laughed again.

"I've rung the bell that time, Kookski!"

The Comrade was singularly unresponsive.

"I have also other things on my thoughts," said he. "For instance our friend who has just left."

"Oh, bother him! He's nice to look at, I quite admit. Better looking than you are, Kookski! But he isn't here now."

"Then it is only the comrade of the moment that interests?"

She looked at him ambiguously.

"It depends. Sometimes I want what I haven't got, and sometimes I'm content with what I have."

"You would be lucky to have him."

Beryl pouted. She certainly could pout bewitchingly.

"Are you his publicity agent? You seem to think of nothing but *my* luck. There'd be no luck in having *me*, would there?"

Up to this point her comrade's demeanour had been exemplary. Inwardly, however, the strain was severe, and at this point his demeanour cracked.

"There has just been passed a law in Moscow, that I can have six wife," he replied with his most engaging smile.

The conversation thereafter ran on entirely different lines. Lieutenant Mead was not mentioned in it, and Comrade Kookski had a strong suspicion that a small foot was trying to kick him under the table. He took considerable credit to himself for removing his top boots from the danger zone, and told himself that with this precaution taken, no serious infidelity to his Eve was in the least probable.

They had reached the stage of sipping liqueurs when Withers entered with a salver.

On it lay a telegram, which he presented to Beryl. She read it and said,

"It's from her ladyship, Withers, to say they are going to stay the night. They expect to get back to-morrow at twelve-fifteen."

Withers retired, and their eyes met. Hers were dancing; his a little startled.

"Hullo! You're not feeling shocked, Comrade, are you?" she asked. "Shall I wire for a chaperone?"

"Or would you like me to go to a hotel?" he asked.

She stared at him, wondering if he were really in earnest.

"Rot! You a communist!"

"Yes, yes, of course," he said. "It was only a spasm. It is over now. But if you will excuse me, I will go to my room for my cigar case."

"Dad has plenty of cigars. Withers will get you one."

"No, no, my own are stronger!" he insisted, and rose and left her.

In his room he hurriedly refreshed the symbols on his sleeve (which had practically vanished during the cushion fight), and thereafter communed with himself with unwonted gravity that lasted for several minutes.

"I wish to Heaven I were neither a gentleman nor in love! One alone is a serious handicap, but the combination is the most infernal nuisance. It's like a burglar with a Methodist upbringing and a special constable's badge. One feels as divided as Beelzebub! That little devil is possibly only having a bit of target practice. She may want to flirt; nothing more. At the same time. . . . Gad, she's one of the prettiest little bits of goods I've ever seen in my life! Should I simply forget Eve altogether? That would get rid of one handicap."

But forgetting is an art not yet quite mastered by man. Mr. Essington's hand stole into his pocket and took from thence a letter. It was the only letter he had ever got from Miss Eve. When he arrived in town he wrote to her, giving his modest address and informing her that he was still Mr. White to the postman, for reasons which he felt sure even such an advocate of truth must appreciate. But no answer had ever come back. There was only that one scrap of paper to stimulate his fidelity. He read,

They may help you to do what you promised. Try to be as nice to other people as you have been to me.

"She wants me to be 'nice,'" he thought.

"Well, hang it, I am being! And what did I promise?"

Reflecting on this point, he put the note back in his pocket and started to leave the room. Only at the door did he remember that he had not provided himself with a cigar.

"A bad symptom!" he said to himself.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE EVENING

IT was approaching ten o'clock in the evening, and Mr. Withers was seated in his room refreshing his intellect with a copiously illustrated daily paper, and at the same time soothing it with a pipe, when a heavy, hurried step sounded in the passage outside. Mr. Withers recognized the Russian boots and immediately removed his pipe from his mouth. By the time the door opened he was already on his feet in a respectful attitude. His fellow committee-man had informed him before dinner of his intention of coming to discuss the affairs of the Soviet, but so far he had not put in an appearance, and Mr. Withers had formed his own conclusions. A *tête-à-tête* dinner with Miss Beryl, followed by a *tête-à-tête* evening with her afterwards was not likely, he considered, to be either a very dull or a very easily concluded entertainment.

His comrade entered with an air of considerable agitation.

"I've lost my chalk!" he announced.

Mr. Withers endeavoured to conceal his suspicion that his lordship had returned to the dining-room in the course of the evening and discovered the decanter.

"Indeed, my lord?" he replied sympathetically. "Was it crayons your lordship is referring to?"

"No, a lump. I bagged it from a billiard room. Have you seen it?"

"I am sorry to say, my lord, I have not."

"Then for Heaven's sake, get another bit for me!"

His lordship seemed to be so much in earnest that in spite of the strangeness of the request, Mr. Withers concentrated the full force of his intellect for several moments on the problem of whether he could or could not remember having seen a lump of chalk in the house. He shook his head apologetically.

"It seems a strange kind of thing to confess, my lord, but I regret to say I don't believe there's a lump of chalk in this whole 'ouse. We don't unfortunately have no billiard room. In fact, as your lordship has no doubt observed, this is not a *real* country 'ouse, even though we do 'ave a lady of title in it now."

"You have another lady too," said Mr. Es-

sington, in a voice charged with significance.

His eye roved disconsolately round the room.

"I wonder whether a cocktail would do—" he began, when he was interrupted by a distant cry.

"Kookski!" it called. "I've found it!"

"By gad!" exclaimed Mr. Essington, much more briskly. "That's a bit of luck. I told her I had lost it—but she doesn't know what it's for! If she did—"

"Kookski!" sounded the voice again.

Mr. Withers' comrade tipped him a wink more suggestive of the soviet than the peerage.

"It's still a toss-up!" he said mysteriously, and turned to go. As he went out, the voice sounded a third time.

"'Ot on the scent!" said Mr. Withers to himself, shaking his experienced head. "'Ot on the scent, and no mistake."

Midnight was approaching and Mr. Withers had finished his paper and knocked out the ashes of his last pipe, when he heard the footsteps again. They seemed more hurried than before, and his distinguished visitor, when he entered, bore still more evident marks of agi-

tation. This time, however, he threw himself into a chair as though he meant to stay.

"A whiskey and soda for Heaven's sake!" he cried. "Long as eternity and stiff as perdition!"

Till he had consumed a considerable portion of it, he said nothing more. Then he observed "You are a comrade of considerable experience of life, Withers. Human nature interests you, I presume?"

"In a manner of speaking, it has been my 'obby, my lord."

"There is an excellent mess-room rule that no ladies' names must be mentioned. What is your candid opinion of a certain young lady whom we may call Miss X?"

Mr. Withers glanced at him cautiously and hesitated. He had several times in his long and successful career been asked similar candid and apparently ingenuous questions by noblemen and other toffs regarding other noblemen and other toffs, and he put down his success largely to the extreme discretion he had shown in replying to them. Ingenuous questions were all very well, but ingenuous answers were apt to be the devil."

"A lively young lady, my lord, very frisky and fresh, and wonderful 'ealthy consider-

ing the hours she keeps," he answered guardedly.

Mr. Essington smiled that ingratiating smile which had won many a heart and disarmed many a suspicion before now.

"That's not the way to treat a pal in the same Soviet," he said, "especially as Miss X's name is a dead secret. By the way, help yourself to a drink."

Mr. Withers smiled back, and helped himself.

"Well, my lord, Miss X is a modern young lady, and them modern, up-to-date young ladies kicks up their 'eels,—showing considerable of the leg in so doing, in a way as used to be confined to a class of person pronounced with a *h* and spelt with a *w*. Your lordship will perhaps comprehend my meaning."

"Perfectly."

"I'm not suggesting no comparisons, my lord. Most of 'em does it, just as they shingles their 'air—because it's the fashion. No 'arm's intended, and they'll do the opposite as soon as the opposite is the fashion. Fashion cracks 'er whip, my lord, and it's the instinct of women to come to 'eel. The idea of smoking a pipe of baccy and having a tot o' grog just be-

cause you likes it, or not having it because you don't like it, never has entered no woman's 'ead that ever I've met.

"I know one woman who would give you a higher opinion of the sex," said Mr. Essington with an earnest and somewhat abstracted air.

Mr. Withers threw him a compassionate glance.

"We all does, my lord. I knew one too, and while it lasts it does give one a different opinion. But facts is facts, and experience is experience. Miss X is following the fashion, but her grandfather was in 'ats, my lord, and 'ats is still protrudin', in a manner of speaking. The real gentry don't set her much of a lead, I'll admit, but it's principally due to her not being far enough away from the counter yet, my lord. In fact that's the matter with 'alf the people I sees going about in society nowadays. They haven't got the breeding. Give 'em a 'undred years and they'll come on a bit. Meanwhile it's a dirty kind of world."

"My own views precisely," said Mr. Essington cordially. "It's wonderful how alike we Communists think." He paused abruptly and seemed to be struck with some disturbing

thought. "And yet, Withers, one must make exceptions. You'll sometimes meet as fine breeding behind a counter as you'll find in the House of Lords! I know of an instance."

"Was your lordship meaning the real Lords or the New Peerage?"

"Either!"

Mr. Withers shook his head respectfully, but emphatically.

"In that case I am afraid your lordship's instance must be a young person of the female gender," he replied with an indulgent smile.

"Damn it, don't you suppose I know a lady when I see one?" asked Mr. Essington with some asperity.

"When we sees a woman, my lord, well we really don't know very well what it is we does see."

"A remarkably profound observation, Withers," said Mr. Essington more calmly, "but it only shows you haven't seen what I've seen."

At that moment a bell rang.

"Miss Beryl's sitting-room!" said Withers, and threw a curious look at his visitor. "Then she hasn't gone off to bed, my lord?"

"Not when I last saw her."

Withers left the room and Mr. Essington lit a cigar. His movements were usually remark-

able for their quiet quickness and dexterity, but now he required three matches. The disturbed expression returned to his eyes.

"Miss Beryl is wondering, my lord, if you has gone to bed," said Mr. Withers re-entering. "She says you was going to show her something in a book."

For a moment Mr. Essington made no reply, and he seemed to hesitate, a very unusual portent with him.

"Tell her I couldn't find the book, but I'll have another look to-morrow," he said suddenly, "and hurry up, for fear I alter the message!"

A few minutes later Mr. Withers re-entered again.

"Well?" asked his visitor.

"Her remark, my lord, was somewhat modern. I remember seeing my sister once spanked for something similar."

Mr. Essington was silent for a moment.

"It is possible I may have to leave to-morrow," he began, "I shall think about it over night, and if—

Again a bell rang, but clearly not the same bell.

"The front-door bell!" exclaimed Withers.  
"At this time o' night!"

"Perhaps Mr. Perrin and her ladyship have come back after all."

"Not at this hour, unless something is very much up."

Mr. Withers went out with an apprehensive eye, and his guest continued to smoke for full quarter of an hour. When at last the butler returned, it was evident that something actually was up.

"It's Mr. George!" he announced. "He's down from Cambridge—sacked from what I can make out of it, my lord. I'm wondering what 'is pa will say, and so's he!"

"Shall I interview him?"

Withers shook his head significantly.

"I've got him off his bed, my lord. I don't know that he's 'ad much, but then his 'ead is not like your lordship's. It takes more than a 'undred years to make a gentleman's 'ead; meaning a 'ead that keeps calm for a 'ole bottle and grows more polite after that. 'is language—well, I wouldn't have believed Mr. George 'ad it in him!"

"We never know what any of us have in us till we have a night like this," said Mr. Essington.

## CHAPTER XVI

### COMRADE GEORGE

C OMRADe KOOKSKI sat down to breakfast alone. The coffee was hot and strong, the bacon and the toast were crisp, yet the Comrade's mind did not seem altogether at ease. Once or twice he heard sounds in the hall outside, and glanced sharply at the door with a hint of anxiety in his eye. But nobody entered.

"I wonder if she is having breakfast in bed!" he said to himself, and on the whole he did not appear to be depressed at the thought.

He had reached the marmalade stage when the door opened at last. He looked round quickly, but it was not Miss Beryl. He saw an undersized young man, expensively and dramatically attired in a costume including very loose flannel trousers, a very low collar, and a large and loose bow tie. His hair was brushed back in a high, smooth pile off a sloping forehead, and, below, his face sloped backwards likewise. In front of each ear was something

that appeared to be incipient whiskerings. The expression in his slightly blood-shot eyes indicated a high degree of interest and gratification.

"Comrade Kookski!" he exclaimed in the voice of one who should exclaim "William Shakespeare!"

Comrade Kookski rose and extended a cordial hand.

"Comrade George!" said he.

In a few minutes they were on the pleasantest terms possible. Comrade George, being exceedingly hungry after his journey of the night before, was at first only able to enunciate his pride and pleasure somewhat indistinctly. Comrade Kookski, having the advantage over him there, spoke fluently, and with such a happy blend of authority and condescension that the young man grew visibly more worshipful all the while. As soon as he was finished, his senior immediately proposed an adjournment to the smoking-room. When they left the dining-room, there was still no sign of Beryl, and there seemed to be a suggestion of relief on Comrade Kookski's face.

Once he was armed with a cigar and his young host with a cigarette, their talk became very frank. Comrade George had evidently

only been waiting till he could do the theme justice, to narrate the full story of his departure from the University of Cambridge. It did infinite credit to the young Communist.

"I could endure my false position no longer!" he declared. "The Warden and I had to have it out! When he told me to conduct myself like a gentleman I damned well nearly gave him the shock of his life by telling him exactly what I thought of his whole class distinctions, and—er—all that sort of thing, don't you know. Yes, I damned well nearly did, but I don't know why, I was weak and I left the old blighter off that time."

Comrade Kookski shook his head seriously.

"That was bad, Comrade, very bad. You should have kick him on the shin and pull his nose! But you did improve next time, eh?"

"By George, I did! Luckily it was after a damned good lunch that time. He said something about ordinary Christian principles. 'Christian,' Comrade—to me! I didn't pull his nose exactly—well, in fact, he's a biggish sort of man and I didn't want more of a scene than I could help. But I told him what I thought of Christianity in two words—two words that I thought even his musty old intellect could

grasp. ‘Damned rot!’ that’s what I said.”

“It expresses your brain exactly, comrade!” cried Comrade Kookski with unqualified enthusiasm, “and no man in Russia has ever expressed it more intelligently!”

“Of course, I *could* have said a great deal more about it.”

“Ah, but nothing that could show him so well just what sort of great intellect you have! And then you leave Cambridge quickly after?”

“I did, comrade; practically immediately. I took the first train up to town.”

“Could you sit down?” asked Comrade Kookski sympathetically.

“Sit down? Yes, why not?” said Comrade George in some surprise.

“Ah, then the warden cannot have done what I should expect. Well, well, you have made a beginning, and now what next?”

George’s face lengthened considerably, and for the moment his high spirit seemed under eclipse.

“The devil of it is,” he confessed, “that my old Guv-nor is a Communist, of course, and all that, but for some dashed reason he is keen I should take my degree—in fact he rather wants me to take a good one.”

“He will be angry then?”

"I'm rather afraid he—well, he won't see it as he ought to. I knew there'd be a shindy. In fact that's why I had rather a good supper in town last night. I was ready for him when I arrived home, I can assure you, Comrade—damned well ready for him! I was damned sick when I found he was away. But now, dash it all, I've got to have it out when I'm not nearly in such good form. I say, couldn't you stand up for me, Comrade, and explain things to him, and everything?"

But his Comrade had already, within the space of some five seconds, evolved an even better plan than this. With his usual forethought he began with a very necessary inquiry:

"Have you still money in your pocket—much money?"

"Yes; luckily I remembered to cash a cheque for the whole of my term's allowance before I left yesterday. But I'm afraid the old guv-nor—"

"Why should you meet the old governor at all this morning?" interposed Comrade Kookski, with an eye that was intelligence itself. "You have much money. I have a little. We are Communists, we can share it both equal! Why wait to see Papa?"

The greatness of the thought seemed for the moment to dazzle Comrade George.

"You mean—er—?" he hesitated.

Comrade Kookski became dramatic.

"Would you not like to see life? To see life with me—Kookski, the most Bolshiest Bolshevik that ever Bolshied! A young man has a right to Live! He has a right to Love—to Kill—to Steal—to Swear—to Drink! Those are our principles! But you know them already? Act then Comrade! Act with me—Kookski!"

George began to catch fire.

"I say, that's rather a brain wave! But what about you? My people are frightfully keen on you, and—"

"I know, I know. And I am keen on them—and very comfortable here. In fact exceedingly. Only, the fact is there is a reason why perhaps I should have a little holiday. Come Comrade, let us see life together!"

George caught fire completely.

"Right oh!" said he. I'll just pack up a few things and see Beryl for a moment—"

Again Comrade Kookski interrupted; impetuously this time.

"No, no, that you must not do, Comrade!

It is important—delicate. Believe me, Kookski knows best. Besides, she was tired last night and now rests. Make haste and let us go before any one shall discover!"

Each hastened to his room, and as he went Comrade Kookski said to himself with not a little complacence:

"If the education of Comrade George isn't another good deed, I'm hanged if I know what is one! He will always be an ass, but if he doesn't come back a chastened ass, I'll eat my top boots!"

Towards noon Miss Beryl appeared downstairs. She spent a few minutes in wandering from room to room, apparently with increasing dissatisfaction as she found them each in turn empty, and then she summoned Withers.

"Annette tells me that Mr. George came back last night. Where is he?"

"He has departed again, Miss."

"Departed? What do you mean? Where has he gone to?"

Her voice had an imperious ring. With unruffled dignity Mr. Withers replied,

"I was not informed of his intentions."

"Oh, really? And where is Mr. Kookski?"

"He has departed with Mr. George."

Beryl stared at him for a moment with parted lips.

"Gone with Mr. George—do you mean—for good?"

"His lord—Mr. Kookski mentioned no such word, Miss. Neither good—nor the opposite."

Beryl turned away.

"Scent's not so 'ot now!" said Mr. Withers to himself.

## PART III



## CHAPTER I

### THE LETTER

IT was blowing half a gale from the south-east, and the rain came out of the Channel with the wind and cast itself upon the coast. The Front was already a line of little ponds ruffled by the gusts, with scarcely a soul to be seen in its whole length. The streets were filled only with the crash of the sea and the pattering of the rain. Everybody was indoors, and there had hardly been one customer at the little tobacconist's shop all morning.

In the back room sat Miss Eve, her fair head bent over a letter. She had been knitting, she had been making up her accounts, she had been reading a novel, always with her air of quiet, purposeful alertness. Then, all of a sudden, the solitude, the constant lashing of rain on the window and the continual drone of the wind, seemed to overcome her. The alertness quite died away. She laid down her book and gazed at the fire. Once a little sigh escaped her; and then she jumped up, unlocked a desk

and took out an envelope. It was addressed in a picturesque hand; so picturesque that it had evidently travelled far round the country. The last line of hieroglyphics had finally been scored through and "Try Brighton" written in a firm official hand. The Post Office had tried Brighton and at last that morning Miss Eve had got her letter.

Now for the second time she took it out of the envelope and began to smile as she read it again. It ran:

11 Hunwell St.,  
London, N. W.

My dearest Eve,—

A thousand thanks! My dear generous girl, why weren't you content to leave me merely in love with you, instead of making me your debtor now, and for life, and in the next few thousand stars which I hope to inhabit in turn, when I am removed from this world where I have cut such a dashed unsatisfactory figure? Will you promise to keep me company in them? I decline to make a start for a better sphere till you do!

Your gift has made me the richest man in Europe! Other fellows may have more money, but they don't get it from *you*. That makes the difference. Darling, I won't blue it, I swear to you! You can trust me! For your sake I have already become more pious than the Pope, more economical than the Provost of Aberdeen, more truthful than George Washington, and more faithful than the boy who stood on the burning deck. I only look at other girls to compare them with you and remind myself afresh how beautiful, how

charming, how kind, how everything that a woman should be but no other woman ever was, you are! Never again will I ever so much as squeeze a girl's fingers tips, barring, of course, yours. I never believed that such an act of virtue was possible. I find it actually is so easy that I automatically press the accelerator and fly the moment they begin to twinkle at me, because I am in love with you!

The last metaphor may perhaps surprise you. It also, however, comes easily, the fact being that I have obeyed your wishes and adopted a regular profession. I trust I am no snob, yet it is a satisfaction to be able to think that my new job, though not exactly lofty, is distinctly a gentleman's calling. I have already recognized a fellow who was sacked from Eton, and another man I used to meet pretty often before he was cashiered, but fortunately they didn't spot me, and I have given them a wide berth. The only fellow professional whose acquaintance I have actually made yet, has scarcely had the same opportunities of coming a mucker, but his heart is of gold. His name is 'Erb, which I understand is descended from Herbert, the H having been removed to assist the pronunciation. He lodges immediately above me, which is lucky, as sound travels upwards, and he is an unusually strong snorer. As it is, I sleep through what sounds like a distant thunder storm every night.

On glancing over this letter, so far, I observe that I have either omitted to mention the nature of my new profession, or my handwriting has deceived even myself. Can you see any allusion to taxi-cabs? The fact is I drive one, and though there is not exactly a fortune in it, it keeps me going.

I also try to please you, Eve darling, by doing the boy scout stunt, whenever I get a chance. I mean the good deed per day. It was done to a lady yesterday. Not the kind of lady who has interested me hitherto, in fact the goodness of the deed was increased by the worst squint I ever shied at, and a smell

of gin. Her circumstances did not appear to be affluent so I took her to a God-forsaken place in Kentish Town for half-fare. I had meant to do it for nothing, but as she got me to deposit her before a pub, I thought it best for her own sake to lighten her purse a little. I hope you approve.

In one trifling detail I have ventured to depart from the programme as arranged by you, dear Eve, and authorized to be sold on the course only. Except in the one detail, my truthfulness literally staggers humanity, but it would merely be depriving myself of any chance of seeing you again if I went about under my own name. Accordingly I am Mr. John White at the address which you see at the top of this paper. You will write to me, dearest girl, in spite of this little error, won't you? Address please to *Mr.*, not J. W. Esq., as in my profession we are very simple especially in the neighborhood where I lodge. I may say that 'Erb has paid me the compliment of not entirely believing a very exact story which I told him of my youth and upbringing, and insists in calling me Gentleman Jack, which after all is gratifying as showing that a highly expensive education has not been entirely thrown away.

Having accidentally referred to the fragment of autobiography which I related to my new friend, and being reluctant to tear up the sheet and begin again, I had better confess also, dear Eve, that it was quite essential I should give some account of myself, and so I had to do a little inventing—only a very little, as you can judge for yourself when I tell you that I merely altered the occupation of my late lamented father (he had none, by the way, so it mattered even less). I made him a successful plumber who had invented an apparatus for making water pipes leak without even pricking a hole in them when he was mending the last burst. That enabled me to receive the education to which my friend 'Erb very frankly takes off his hat, but the water board got wind

of it, and being a rival concern and extremely unscrupulous, bagged the patent without compensation. Hence I am now driving a taxi. I trust this very trifling flight of imagination will meet with your approval, dearest, under the circumstances. Anyhow you have forgiven so much already that I count, darling, on your forgiving this too.

I don't like to boast of my virtues, for the same reason that Icelanders don't boast of their snakes, but in case you are disappointed with me, Eve, I must say a word about my good deed the day before yesterday. I stood 'Erb a bottle of champagne as the poor devil said he had never tasted the stuff in his life. We only had teacups, but I made him drink every cupful to your health, and drank my own to it too. If you had seen his pleasure, especially towards the end, I think you would really give me a good mark.

Dearest Eve, do write to me! It is bad enough being away from you, but if I don't ever hear from you, human nature won't be able to endure it any longer. I'll have to risk everything and come back to Brighton! Write soon and write often!

I would send you my love but cannot get it into the envelope. It is too great!

Ever your most loving, admiring, grateful and devoted,

FRANCIS MANDELL-ESSINGTON.

Miss Eve was still smiling when she finished the letter, but it was a smile not wholly of amusement. There was a tenderness in her eye, that would have made its writer a happy man had he been there to see. For some minutes she seemed very thoughtful. Then she smiled again and thought:

"Perhaps I ought to—just a very short letter—"

The sharp ting of the bell over the outer door aroused her abruptly. She heard the door being closed again and a man's step in the shop. She rose, laid the letter on the table, and went out through the door behind the counter. A squall of wind was booming down the street at the moment and Miss Eve's movements were light and noiseless. The man evidently had not heard her and was gazing round the shop with his back turned. She could only see that he was above middle height and attired in a waterproof and a felt hat with its brim turned down. From both hat and waterproof water was streaming.

"Yes, sir?" she asked politely.

He turned his face, and at the sight of it, the colour fled from her own, while every muscle in her body seemed to stiffen. The man, on his part, nodded and smiled at her, but for a moment said nothing. He was not ill-looking. Once he had probably been handsome in a dark, obviously romantic kind of way; a type to allure women rather than men. He was evidently still well on the right side of forty, but life had had time to stamp a warning on every feature. The man, or even the

woman, who trusted him now would have to be of a singularly unsuspecting nature.

"Well, Eve," he said at length, "this is a nice welcome home!"

She still said not a word. He laughed and added:

"Aren't you glad to see your hubby back again?"

## CHAPTER II

### THE HUSBAND

MISS EVE answered at last.

"Why have you broken your word?"

The man laughed.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said, raising his hand, with a flourish, "Mr. Bradford—Mrs. Bradford!"

To call him drunk would have been to libel Mr. Bradford, but to call him dead sober would certainly have been to pay him too high a compliment. The girl continued to look steadily at him, and this cool gaze, combined with her quiet, restrained manner seemed to cause her visitor rapidly increasing irritation.

"Why have you come back?" she repeated.

"To see my dear wife, of course!"

"You gave me your word never to try to see me again. Have you forgotten?"

"I couldn't keep away, darling!"

"Don't trouble to tell me a lie," she said quite quietly, "you have come for something, of course."

"A lie! Who has lied? Damn it, don't stare at me like a china image, Eve! I haven't lied. I do want to see you."

She shook her head.

"I have nothing more to say to you. You have seen me and now you can go again."

"Ah, but I have something more to say to you!"

He paused and leered at her significantly.

"Well?"

"Who was so virtuous that she couldn't put up with an ordinary human being as a husband?"

"An *ordinary* human being?" she repeated, and for an instant smiled. "I have never met anybody like you."

"Oh, you are so superior, so virtuous? That's still what's the matter with you, is it? I was fool enough to think it was once, but I know better now!"

"If you have anything to say to me, please say it."

He leant over the counter.

"I've been in Brighton for the last three days. I've been meeting an old pal or two, and I have been learning things. Virtuous! I like that! What about Mr. White?"

She could not control her eyes. He saw the flash of alarm in them, and laughed.

"I've caught you this time! No more humbug about virtue, please. It won't wash."

"Is that all you have to say?" she asked quietly. "If so, you can go."

For an instant he seemed a trifle taken aback. Then he grew more truculent.

"It isn't all by a damned long way! I am going to find out a little more about Mr. White!"

"I thought you told me you knew all about him."

"I know enough about him and his visits here, shut up with you in that back room! Everybody in the street—damned near everybody in Brighton—knew what was going on. And I know all about the man who tried to nab him, and how Mr. White came disguised as a Commissionnaire. There's precious little I don't know, Eve, so the game's up so far as you are concerned."

"But there is a little, and you want to find that out?" she suggested, quite calmly.

He looked at her with unwilling admiration.

"You always had brains enough—enough to get rid of me when you saw it didn't pay you

to keep—" He broke off abruptly and in a little confusion.

She finished the sentence for him.

"To keep you any longer. No I couldn't afford it. You see you had spent my own money. You were spending what I earned faster than I could earn it, and it became too expensive. Now what do you intend to do—try to live on me again, or blackmail Mr. White?"

He leant still further over the counter.

"I've half a mind to do you in, you devil!"

"You are not drunk enough," she replied. "You once tried when you were more or less sober, you may remember, but you thought my scissor case was a revolver. One has to have a little pluck even to murder a woman."

He looked at her for a moment, struggling with his emotions.

"I am going to find out what the blighter's real name is!" he cried; only he used stronger language.

"I see. That's your difficulty then? You have discovered that White isn't his real name and you want me to tell you what it is? Well, I am afraid you must go and ask somewhere else."

Again he gazed at her and again the look

of reluctant admiration came into his eyes.

"Very clever! You make me lose my temper and give myself away! All right; but it won't come off again." He assumed a cool and rakish attitude and said, "Give me a packet of cigarettes, will you?"

Miss Eve resumed her polite, businesslike manner.

"Do you wish to purchase a packet, sir?"

He stared at her and laughed.

"Yes, miss, and there's the blank money! I've got some, you see."

He flung half a crown on the counter and pocketed his change and a packet of cigarettes.

"And now," said he, "since it's so damned wet outside and I don't often get a chance of a yarn with my wedded wife, I'll step inside for a bit."

He turned towards the door of the inner room. A hot protest was on her lips, but there was mischief in his eye, and with a shrug she curbed her tongue and returned, herself, through the counter door, just as he turned the handle of the other. And then with a little gasp of consternation she saw the letter lying open on the table. Already he had seen it too, and now he heard the stifled gasp. Both started for the table together. He had the shorter

distance, but she sprang like a cat. Their hands seized the letter simultaneously and the next moment each held half. Her wits were the quickest and she glanced at hers instantly. There were three sheets and she held the upper part of them all. The address was safe, but the signature was with him.

"By gad!" he swore. "I'm going to have the rest of that letter!"

For answer she leapt at him, tore away most of the paper he held, and was round at the other side of the table within a second. For a moment he was too astounded to speak. Then he picked up her novel, threw it at her, and missed. A minute's hard swearing followed, while she regained her breath. Then at last he began to realize what had happened. Smoothing out the paper he tried to read it, but this time Mr. Essington's handwriting stood that gentleman in good stead. Still swearing gently, Bradford turned over the fragments till he came to the signature. And then he realized exactly. A minute or so ago he had held it intact, and now only the last two syllables remained.

". . . ington," he read aloud, and tried to throw a note of triumph into his voice. "I'll soon learn the rest now!" She heard him mut-

ter, "Addington, Babington, Carrington, Dishington," and as he began to perceive the number of possible alternatives, she saw the thunder clouds gather again and was ready for what followed. Without a word of warning he suddenly rushed round the table at her. Even more swiftly she skipped round ahead of him, flashed through the door into the shop and then out of the shop into the street. As he rushed into the shop after her, he saw her already standing out in the rain.

"Where are you off to?" he demanded.

"To get the police."

Mr. Bradford began to realize the situation better and better. A street in Brighton, even a quiet side street, on a rainy day, was scarcely the best place to choose for crime against the person, and that lithe, alert, quick-witted figure was hardly the best kind of victim. He had just lost one golden opportunity, but time was in his favour, and the slips that all guilty lovers make sooner or later. He assumed an entirely different manner, and assumed it so well that she, on her part, realized a new danger, if the man could keep his head and always play the injured husband.

"My dear girl, come in out of the rain, and don't play the fool! I'm a hasty fellow, I admit,

but, damn it all, finding another man corresponding with my wife is a good enough excuse, most people would consider! I won't hurt you, I swear I won't."

Without a word, she came back, shut the outer door and took up her post behind the counter. Meanwhile he lit one of his cigarettes.

"I'd like to meet this Mr. 'Ingtion,'" he observed. "Being a friend of yours, Eve, he must be a nice fellow. Well, I'll be in or about Brighton off and on for a bit yet, I daresay, and perhaps I may manage to run up against him. I'll promise to get my tobacco nowhere else, so that will be bringing me this way now and then. And meantime one might hear something else. You never know your luck. Very few fellows I've been after have ever given me the slip yet. Bye-bye, Eve dear—my virtuous wife!"

He threw her one last significant look from the door, and then passed out into the storm.

## CHAPTER III

### THE BURGLARY

SOMEWHAT to his protégé's surprise, Comrade Kookski decided upon a suburban base for their operations. When in town, his natural inclination was always for crowds, clubs and the centres of life and fashion; but against this, there was now the instinct of the hunted. As a lair he decided the suburbs were safest. The arguments he advanced were thus essentially truthful (a point on which he made a fresh resolution to be exceedingly particular), though expressed in somewhat symbolical language. This last detail he considered immaterial. Essential truth was the real test.

"The British police, they will look for me in Piccadilly," he explained. "If they see me there they will try to arrest. I will have to shoot them; but, of course, I will shoot you first, Comrade, to prevent them from catching you. Ah yes, I think first always of my comrades! None have ever lived alive that have been with me when I am chased by the police. I save

them all from prison! Also, it is useful for me. The police stop to examine the body and I run away."

After this panegyric on his own altruisms, his young friend ceased to offer any objections to a suburban residence. They would spend their evenings in livelier centres, he was assured, but a quiet hotel in the suburb of Wimbledon was selected as their headquarters.

"I once did know a nice girl here, and so have pleasant memories; also we can play golf," explained Comrade Kookski over a bottle of port. On perceiving an expression of surprise on Comrade George's face, he immediately added that the lady was a Nihilist refugee, and that he had learned to play golf in order to improve his English vocabulary, and thereupon changed the conversation to sterner themes.

"To blood!" he cried, raising his glass and drinking to the toast. "To Free Love with all the beautiful women in England! To Communism with all the richest men! To bombs and knifes for all the bad people that is owed money to by us!"

Comrade George had been distinctly quieter than usual ever since he had learned his distinguished friend's method of preserving his

followers from capture. But the port was a stimulating brand, and the communistic division of their property (which had been achieved by his handing over his own share to his leader) seemed to have touched a generous chord in Comrade Kookski's heart. A second pint in fact was already on the table. The last traces of George's depression vanished.

"By God, Comrade, show me what to do and I'll do it!" said he. "I feel like something desperate, damn it! What about—er—smashing a few windows to begin with?"

"Windows?" cried the great Bolshevik scornfully. "Windows don't bleed; they give no dying shrieks; they have no money in their pocket to communize! Come, Comrade, another glass, and I will show you *real* crime!"

They leapt up, put on their hats and coats and started for the station. Their hat brims were turned down over their eyes, their coat collars turned up about their necks; precautions on which Kookski insisted. The disguise afforded was not perhaps very great, but the sense of adventure became acute. What form it actually was to take, what crime they were to commit, and where it was to be committed, were questions concerning which he threw out merely the vaguest and most mysterious hints.

They were to take train to Piccadilly Circus, and there Comrade George would see! But that was all Comrade George could extract.

As a matter of fact, it was with an exceedingly open mind that his leader paced along the dark, intermittently lamp-lit suburban road, with a cigar between his teeth, and a tendency to sing.

"Let me once get the young blighter there and something is bound to turn up," he said to himself easily.

So open was his mind that he even began to wonder whether the journey up to Town in a District train was worth the trouble. And immediately after this thought had struck him, a very singular incident happened. It happened so quickly and suddenly that Comrade George did not actually see it, but he was assured of the fact in a whisper that thrilled him to the marrow.

"The signal!" hissed Kookski in his ear.

"What? Where? When? What is it? Which signal? What do you mean?" George whispered back eagerly.

"Hush!" said his leader, "Not so loud!" Gripping him by the arm, he pointed across the road. "There! I saw it distinctly again! Two blue, one pink, up and down twice and across

three times! Yes; there can be no doubt about it!"

The signalling, though it sounded complicated, had been done too quickly for George's untrained eye to follow; in fact, even to see it distinctly at all. What he actually saw was a modest villa on the opposite side of the road, standing a little back in its small garden, and very brightly lit on the upper floor. The blinds were down, but the curtains were not drawn, and George thought he caught a glimpse once or twice of dark shadows moving to and fro.

"The very place, the very night," whispered Comrade Kookski. "Now you see why we have come to Wimbledon! Ah, here comes my agent! Wait here; keep in the shadows till I have with him a few words spoken!"

A mysterious swinging light was approaching on the opposite side. Kookski crossed the road, and just as he reached the other sidewalk the lantern bearer emerged into the radiance of a lamp. For a moment George feared that his Captain had made a terrible mistake. The man was dressed as an ordinary postman, and, moreover, carried what seemed a postman's bag. As an official of a capitalist Government would this underling try to arrest the formidable Russian? George knew his own

fate then, and was prepared to fly as fast from the altruistic Kookski as Kookski fled from the capitalistic postman—faster, if possible.

But with a sigh of relief, he witnessed what appeared to be an amicable conversation. The postman touched his cap and turned into the garden of the lit-up house, where a moment later he was ringing the front-door bell. Kookski, on his part, recrossed the road with an air of greater mystery than ever.

"I have three hundred postmen, all my agents!" he explained. "That is the most clever of them all. He opens the letters and writes in them propaganda, such as, 'Where will Mr. Churchill go when he dies?' And next day he puts the answer!"

"Yes, but what's going on in that house? And why did they signal? And why . . .?"

"Listen, Comrade, and I will tell you! In that house is all our papers hidden. Our enemy is there to find our secrets, but Kookski and Comrade George will foil him. I have chosen you as our bravest to help me! We must get those papers! Are you afraid or will you venture?"

The port still warmed Comrade George's heart, and he answered valiantly,

"You can count on me, Comrade!"

"Brave friend!" cried his leader. "Now I shall explain what you must do."

The first part of the daring programme was simple. Kookski was to go boldly to the house of mystery and ring the bell. He would be admitted by another agent, disguised as a maid servant. Meanwhile George was to remain on the far side of the road, and in the darkest place, for ten minutes by his watch. He was then to approach the house very cautiously and knock thrice gently on the door. The next steps would be told him when the door opened. A warm pressure of the hand concluded these directions, and with that his leader crossed the road, and in a minute or two George saw him actually admitted by the admirably disguised agent (who in fact was as good an imitation of a parlourmaid as the other agent was of a postman).

Ten minutes later Comrade George approached the house with a resolute air and in a moment was tapping on the door. He tapped very gently indeed, but he had scarcely touched the panels for the second time when the door quietly opened and he saw dimly the beard of Kookski and heard his whisper, "Come in; very quietly!"

The front door was shut softly behind him,

and he found himself in all but pitch darkness. Somewhere from the back of the house a little light escaped and showed him vaguely the outline of a small hall and a staircase rising out of it.

"Take off your boots!" commanded Kookski, and George took them.

"Now tie the laces together!"

George tied them and then was led by the arm, stepping gingerly on tiptoe, to the foot of the stairs. There he got his last directions.

"We are surrounded by enemies! All depends on your doing what I tell you without one mistake! If you fail me, we are lost! I will go up the stairs first and then will whistle. When you hear it, you will hold your boots by the laces in your teeth and come up on your hands and knees. At the top you will find me—and then!"

With this last mysterious and unnerving hint, his leader patted him encouragingly on the back, and George could hear him ascend the stair to the accompaniment of a gentle creak. Evidently for some reason Comrade Kookski had not removed his own boots.

Out of the darkness above a soft whistle sounded. Falling on his hands and knees, and with his heart thumping so loudly that he

feared its palpitations alone would betray him, Comrade George slowly ascended the stairs. His boots would occasionally clash together, and each time his heart ceased beating altogether. Their laces, moreover, tasted unpleasantly of boot polish, and their weight was a distinct strain upon his teeth. He thought he was never going to reach the first landing.

At last he was beside his leader.

"Keep just as you are whatever happens!" hissed Kookski, and then George heard him make a step forward and turn a handle. The next moment he found himself looking into a brilliantly lit drawing room, apparently quite full of people. Most of them were in the neighbourhood of ten years old and seemed to be carrying either toys or red and blue balloons. Over their heads a line of adults in festive attire were gazing down at the apparition with its boot laces in its mouth. All were cheering and laughing with extraordinary enthusiasm. There could be no doubt that Comrade George was a complete success.

"My dear children," rang out the voice of Comrade Kookski, "here you see the little entertainment I promised you! Behold the Cat Burglar!"

## CHAPTER IV

### GEORGE'S CONQUEST

COMRADE GEORGE'S bewilderment would have been considerably lessened had he been at his leader's side through the earlier stages of their adventure. Kookski's conversation with his agent in the postal service had as a matter of fact consisted in an enquiry concerning the name and nature of the gentleman who lived at the house where a party was evidently in progress. His confident air and distinguished bearing as he put the question, at once elicited the information that the house belonged to a Mr. Donaldson, an industrious mercantile gentleman from the neighbourhood of Dundee, who had recently celebrated a rise in his salary by the purchase of that villa.

Armed with this information, the Comrade boldly rang the bell and presented a card of introduction to Mr. Donaldson. The card was one of a small supply which he had had the

forethought to pocket before leaving Beech House. It bore the name of the Countess of Twickenham; a pencilled addendum "To introduce Mr. White," and the letters (also in pencil, but very large and bold) "B.L.L." On Mr. Donaldson's appearance, obviously very much impressed by the card, these letters were explained as standing for the Brighter London League, in which Mr. White said the Countess was greatly interested. It was part of their programme to provide entertaining surprises at children's parties, and learning that one was in progress here (from the size of the shadows on the blind, though he did not mention this detail), he begged to offer a very realistic and diverting imitation of a burglary. After a brief consultation with Mrs. Donaldson and the younger members of the family, this offer was rapturously accepted, and the arrangements were left in the experienced hands of the League's Representative.

As he raised his colleague from the floor and gently removed the bootlaces from his teeth, amid continuous cheering, he whispered in George's ear, "I have deceived them so far, but our lives still hang on a thread! Show no surprise!"

Thus warned, Comrade George went

through the process of introduction to Mr. and Mrs. Donaldson and the other grown-up members of the party, with creditable calm. It is true that his face was pink and his words halting, but since the party were unacquainted with his usually super-confident demeanour, this seemed natural enough under the peculiar circumstances. By the time he had resumed his boots and consumed a whisky and soda mixed by his genial host in the proportions customary in Dundee, George's ruffled feelings were already beginning to be soothed. He permitted himself to address several remarks to the less suburban of the guests in a very condescending manner, and a little later was seen to smile quite affably in the course of a conversation with a tall young lady remarkable for the archness of her manner and the shortness of her skirts.

By the time the party repaired downstairs to a hilarious supper, he was on the most friendly terms with the arch lady, and his lost confidence had returned with added exuberance. Several times his Comrade had whispered in his ear the handsomest compliments on his conduct, and an assurance that, thanks to his presence of mind and spirited conduct, all was now going well. George began to feel

himself a hero, and this agreeable sensation was encouraged by another whisky and soda, mixed as before. He pulled several crackers with the arch lady, laughed very loudly at her *bons mots*, and still more loudly at his own, and began to have serious thoughts of pursuing their acquaintance considerably further—"damned considerably" said Comrade George to himself.

He had been encouraged by observing the eye of Comrade Kookski beaming upon him with marked approval, and he was not at all surprised when his leader drew him aside as the guests were moving away from the supper room and offered him the heartiest congratulations on his conquest.

"But I say, who is she?" asked George. "I'd be damned obliged to you, Kookski, if you'd find that out for me. I see she wears a wedding ring, so I suppose the bit of goods is married. But, hang it, that doesn't matter, does it? What? One ought to act up to our principles, I always think! Don't you? The Right to Love! What?"

"Comrade," replied his leader, laying his hand on his shoulder impressively. "The reputation of Bolshevism is in your hands! If you behave yourself like a gentleman to that lady,

I shall cease to believe you are a genuine Communist!"

"I won't!" declared George very emphatically indeed.

"Brave Comrade! I go now to arrange your adventure. In fact, I have begin to arrange already."

As he approached the arch lady, Comrade Kookski eyed her attentively. Her frame was muscular, her jaw firm, and in the intervals between her periods of archness, there was something that might almost be called businesslike in her eye.

"If that lady doesn't advance George's education a stage further, I am no judge of woman," he said to himself.

A little later he again drew his young follower out of the crowd and informed him that he had made the most satisfactory arrangement imaginable. The lady, it appeared, lived in West Kensington, and on being informed in Mr. White's most obliging manner that he and his friend resided in that neighbourhood also and proposed to return there by taxi, she readily agreed to his suggestion that she should avail herself of this fortunate chance of convoying her home.

"I will sit outside with the driver," he whis-

pered to George as they waited for the destined victim in the hall. "You will have the field to yourself, Comrade! You have had still another whisky, I hope?"

"Rather! I say, damn it, wheresh th' other sleeve of my coat? I can't find it!"

As he assisted his follower into his coat, Comrade Kookski said to himself with a touch of apprehension,

"I only hope he doesn't go to sleep in the cab!"

The lady appeared, cloaked and smiling, and amid the cordial farewells of their hosts and the cheers of the children, the three set out to find a taxi. Luck was with them, for within a minute an empty cab returning to town overtook them, and was promptly engaged. Explaining to the lady that he had a slight headache and required fresh air, Mr. Essington helped her and his young friend in, and seated himself beside the driver.

"Butterfield Road, West Kensington," said he, "and you needn't hurry."

The driver seemed to look at him oddly, but for a moment answered nothing. Then, when they were under way, he had another glance, and enquired,

"Have you growed that beard, Jack, or 'ired it out?"

"Erb, by gad!" exclaimed his fare cordially. "This is a bit of luck! Do you mean to tell me you spotted my voice?"

"It ain't only the voice, it's the haristocratic manner, Jack. I've drove a lot o' toffs in my time, but ever since we first met I've always said as Gentleman Jack in my own perfession beats 'em all for what I call stylishness!"

"It's a devil of a handicap if one wants to lead a quiet life!" said Mr. Essington with feeling. "At the same time I am very gratified to find there's one man who appreciates me. I have suffered severely from criticism in my day; in fact it is even apt to take the pestilential form of interfering with my liberty. If you ever happen to have a doctor in your cab, 'Erb, and feel inclined for suicide, take him with you! Lawyers also are very damnable fellows. Between those two professions, I've led a dog's life of it. Luckily half the world are women. The bright spots are to be found in that sex, 'Erb."

The first part of these observations seemed to leave 'Erbert lukewarm. He listened politely, much as he would have listened to an

esteemed Chinese friend criticizing the customs of Pekin in his own language; but the last sentences touched a sympathetic chord.

"Harabella has took up with a policeman," he remarked, "so she ain't no bright spot, but I've got a new one, and I tell you, Jack, it's a bit of all right this time!"

"You deserved some luck at last, 'Erb," said Mr. Essington heartily. "As far as I remember, Arabella was your forty-third."

"I don't know about the exact number," said 'Erb, "I'd reckon it more like thirty-three, or p'raps thirty-five, but I do 'ave bad luck and no mistake. I ain't 'andsome, I admit, but I takes 'em to the movies, and I squeezes 'em, and what more a girl wants to make her 'appy, I can't think. But some'ow, they all moves on. 'Ow's your own bit o' fluff, Jack? What's her name—Miss Adam? No, Eve! 'Ow's she? Sticking to you still?"

Mr. Essington sighed.

"I wish I knew! I haven't heard one word from her since I saw her last. I'm really devilish worried about it."

His recent career would not have suggested to an outside observer any unusual amount of worry, but one was bound to take his word for

it, especially as he became all of a sudden very melancholy-looking now.

'Erb looked almost equally solemn.

"Why don't you 'ave a run down to Brighton, and see for yourself, now you've dropped the taxi business? I think you oughter."

There was something significantly sinister in this last sentence that made Mr. Essington turn sharply in his seat.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Well," said 'Erb, "I won't say as I have always been what you'd call a extra religious man, but I do *believe* in things, and I was 'aving a cup of tea only yesterday and thinking some'ow of you, Jack—I'd been driving a toff with a eyeglass and that reminded me of you. Not as you wears a eyeglass, but he 'ad spats too. Not as I've seed you in spats, but there it was, any'ow he reminded me. Well, what should I find in my cup o' tea, but a visitor! It was 'ard and so it wasn't a girl, and I knew o' no man likely to visit me. And then I says to myself, 'I was just thinking of Jack. It must be a visitor for Jack!' And then I remembered you'd smashed up your cab and gone off sudden into 'iding—which I haven't told a word to another living soul, Jack, not even when the police was asking me about you.

So then I thought, ‘It isn’t likely to be Jack. It must be another gent visiting his girl be’ind his back!’ I’d ’ave a run down to Brighton to see if I was you; s’welp me, I would!”

“By gad, I will go!” said Mr. Essington. “The gentleman was probably only collecting the water rate, but I want the girl herself, and I’ll take your tip, ‘Erb!”

At that moment they were startled by a muffled yell behind them. It seemed to come from the inside of the cab.

## CHAPTER V

### GEORGE'S EDUCATION

"GOR' blimey! What's that?" exclaimed 'Erb.

They were crossing Putney Bridge; a young moon overhead in the widened arch of night sky; reflections twinkling in the water on either side. Mr. Essington had been gazing at the moon with a sentimental eye. He now looked all round him and then down at the pavement, with every appearance of surprise. 'Erb was too intently engaged in dodging the traffic on the bridge to take his eye off the road ahead.

"It seemed to come from the river," said Mr. Essington.

"The river? It sounded like as if it was in my cab!"

"When one is going over a bridge, sound behaves in a very peculiar way."

Again came a stifled cry.

"It *is* in the cab!" cried 'Erb.

Mr. Essington laughed.

"I haven't told you all my accomplishments, 'Erb. You didn't know I was a ventriloquist, did you?"

"A vent—'ow much? You mean one of them chaps as 'olds a conversation with a wooden himage?"

"That's the sort of thing."

"Do it again then," said 'Erb sceptically.

"In a moment."

A moment passed, and the cries were now mingled with a knocking sound, as of knuckles on glass.

"D'y'e mean to say that's all you!" gasped 'Erb. "Well, I never 'eard such a lifelike imitation of a hexcited man trying to stop my cab, not in all my born days!"

"It is merely a matter of practice!" said Mr. Essington modestly.

The rapping sounded hard and loud at 'Erb's very back.

"It ain't you!" he cried. "My Gawd, I believe your blinking pal is insulting the lydy!"

"My dear chap, it was a man's voice!" urged Mr. Essington.

"'Ark! That's a woman's voice too! I'm going to stop and see what's up. If I ketch that young toff insulting of a lydy, I don't care

if he is a pal o' yours, Jack, I'm going to learn him!"

The cab stopped and in a twinkling 'Erb was down and had the door open. From it emerged, not a terrified female, but the dishevelled form of Comrade George. One eye was half-closed, and either his own or somebody else's blood besmeared his cheek below.

"Help! Police!" he gasped, and fled along the pavement like a bolting rabbit.

"'Ere! You jus' wait for me!" shouted 'Erb, darting off in pursuit.

The chase was brief. Some fifty yards off, Mr. Essington could see his young friend's head firmly screwed under 'Erb's arm, while the two forms writhed together. Meanwhile the lady had also descended from the cab, and was giving him her candid opinion of Comrade George. She also was slightly disarranged by the combat, and her emotions were exceedingly strong.

"What do you mean by leaving the creature alone with me? I believe you did it deliberately!"

"I did, madam," he confessed courteously.  
She stared at him.

"And why, may I ask?"

"For the sake of his education."

"Did you expect *me* to educate him?"

"I did, and you have."

She stared harder than ever.

"Well, I'm—" she began.

"Damned," said Mr. Essington, promptly, adding politely, "I hope I have supplied the proper word, madam?"

"You have," she said emphatically, and started to walk away.

"Permit me to place the cab at your disposal —empty!" he urged courteously.

She threw him one glance over her shoulder.

"No, thank you," she said, and quickened her stride.

From the other direction 'Erb approached slowly; Comrade George's head being still under his arm.

"Hi! Stop 'er!" he shouted. "I'm going to make 'im apolergise!"

"It's all right," said Mr. Essington. "She has had her money's worth without that."

"And what are you going ter do with this 'ere swine?"

"Take him to the nearest pub and give him a drink."

"A drink! The kind of drink 'e needs is being took back to the river and tanked up there! Besides, 'e's more'n 'alf drunk already."

"Push him inside and I'll explain."

George was pushed in and Mr. Essington resumed his seat beside his friend.

"I propose to make him quite drunk," he said.

"Well!" exclaimed 'Erb, "I've often 'eard tell of philanthropists, and 'ow they were mostly balmy; and 'ere it's gone and took you the same way! Make 'im drunk? That there young fellow don't *deserve* to be drunk, Jack. He don't ever deserve in his 'ole future life to get drunk! He oughter be kept on water till he perishes of dropsy. That's what oughter 'appen to 'im. And it oughter be put in the papers as a warning to others:—'The penalty was a 'undred years without 'aving another drink!'"

"I merely propose to complete his education, 'Erb. Now just listen to me, because you have got to lend a hand."

An hour or so later Comrade George was put to bed by his two preceptors. It was not in the same hotel as he started out from, but in a much more modest hostelry within a stone's throw of 'Erbert's own residence. Mr. Essington thereafter returned to Wimbledon with an approving conscience.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE MORNING AFTER

NEXT morning, about ten o'clock, Comrade Kookski entered his young follower's modest bedroom. He found him just awakened and exceedingly bewildered.

"Good-morning, my brave comrade!" he cried with an air in which pride and pleasure seemed equally mingled.

"Morning," said George. "I say, where am I? This isn't my proper room!"

"That I will explain in a moment, Comrade. But first, a thousand congratulations!"

And with that he wrung George's hand with much emotion.

"Er—thanks; but—er—what on?" asked George, looking pleased but surprised.

"You are now one of Us! One of the Bolsheviks which will be remembered so long as blood shall drip! Till we have exercised the Right to Kill we are but beginners. Now you are initiated!"

"The Right to Kill— Yes, I quite believe in

it—theoretically,” stammered George, turning visibly paler. “But surely I haven’t—”

“You have! Fortunate young man! She died of the kick! Brave Comrade!”

“Who died? What kick?”

“The lady which you attacked so bravely in the cab. We saw you through the glass. I said to Comrade ’Erbert—that is the fierce Bolshevik that punched your head because he feared you had spared her life, I said to him, ‘Drive on! Do not stop. He will finish her if we give him time!’ I saw your kicks. Ah, the stomach is the right place to kick, brave boy! When I looked into the cab she was dead. Again I congratulate!”

Comrade Kookski removed his felt hat and made a profound bow. Then he shook the trembling youth once more warmly by the hand.

“I was so happy as to hear the last groan. It was splendid!”

Comrade George found his voice with difficulty.

“Do you mean really—did she die; honour bright?”

Kookski scowled at him fiercely.

“Honour! Do you say such a word as *honour* to a Bolshevik? That is a gentleman’s

word. You are not a gentleman, I trust, Comrade?"

"Oh, no, no!" said George hurriedly.

"I knew it!" smiled his leader. "Then do not, my dear boy, use such words again. Do you suppose I would congratulate if you had left her even half dead? Cheer up! You will not even have to pay for her funeral. That is all arranged already."

"What—what did you do with the body?" gasped George.

"We just dropped it in the river. Oh, it was quite simple. We are used to such things in Russia. We kill thousands there. Bah! What is one woman?"

For some moments George sat up in bed, petrified with horror, dimly trying to recall his escapade of the night.

"I know I must have been beastly drunk—" he began.

"Beastly! Yes, you were magnificent!" said Comrade Kookski enthusiastically.

"I don't remember anything distinctly—even in the cab. And afterwards—someone attacked me—and then you said I needed a drink—and there was another man with us. That's all I remember. I didn't mean to kill her—I swear I didn't!"

Kookski smiled and shook his head.

"Ah, that is your modesty. I saw you, Comrade!"

"I didn't intend to!" cried George. "If it had been a man—but do you mean to say I've really killed a woman?"

"But that counts much higher with us! We kill our Czar; that was good. But it was all his ladies we killed that make our Revolution so glorious! You see we are making a new world, and if we keep old ideas, how would it be different? How should we get credit for great thoughts unless they are just the opposite of old thoughts?"

"But is it really true?"

"How can a thing be both true and new? All the truth is found out long ago. You must forget it, Comrade, if you wish to be a great brilliant modern thinker. And you have much promise of such if you will keep on going as you have begun."

Even this handsome tribute did not seem to cheer Comrade George.

"I mean is it true that I have really killed her?"

Comrade Kookski held up his hand to enjoin silence.

"Hark! What is that? Yes, I think Com-

rade 'Erbert will be back. He shall tell you more about it."

George did not hear any sound himself, but evidently Comrade 'Erbert had actually returned, because when Kookski opened the door and shouted, "'Erb! Is that you?" there came a hoarse reply, followed by a heavy step upon the stair. As a matter of fact 'Erb had been putting in time in the bar below, and he now entered with a sprightly air surprising in one of such bloodthirsty views. In fact he only ceased whistling as he came into the room. A severe look from Comrade Kookski, however, produced a sudden and striking change in his demeanour. Anything fiercer than the scowl which succeeded the whistling, it would be difficult to imagine.

"Well, Comrade," said Kookski. "What news?"

"They've bin and found the body!" announced 'Erb

Kookski gave a dramatic start.

"Heavens! I mean Hell!" he exclaimed. "This is serious—very serious. Who found it?"

For an instant 'Erb scratched his head. He thought he knew all the answers off by heart. Then with a flash of inspiration he replied,

"A young feller what dived in for it. Smith 'is name was. 'E seen it floatin' bottom upwards, and thinks it was 'is dog which he had lost larst Sunday when him and 'is girl was having a walk. So off with 'is Trilby and 'is boots, and in he goes' ead first. Three times he sank before he reached it, but 'e was a strong swimmer and when he 'ad opened the sack, there was a blinkin' woman!"

Comrade Kookski saw that he must put leading questions if he was to get the answers required. (Mr. Smith had not been in the programme.)

"Did he send for the police?" he inquired.

'Erb remembered then the proper answer to the first question.

"Why, he were a perliceman himself! Didn't I mention that? On 'is beat he was, when 'e seen what seemed to 'im like somethink in the water . . ."

"Yes, yes, you have told us all that, Comrade," Kookski interposed hurriedly. "And then did he fetch other police?"

"Other police? Why, you never saw so many perlice except in a percession, as was collected round that there deader! And 'tecs from Scotland Yard, and mounted perlice, and I don't know 'ow many more! I couldn't

'ardly get near to 'ave a look. In fact I really only saw 'er between their legs."

"Bad, bad! Very bad!" said Comrade Kookski looking graver than ever. "Do they know who the corpse is?"

"Bless your 'eart, 'er name was marked on all 'er linen, even on 'er suspenders it were marked! Oh, they knows right enough."

"And are there any clues to who has killed her?"

He glanced at Comrade George as he put this question in his gravest voice, and saw the unfortunate youth's mouth fall open like a split orange. 'Erb rose to the seriousness of the situation.

"Clues, my Gawd! Why, she were thick with clues. They took 'er finger prints while I were looking, and they corresponded exactly. And the knife was still sticking in the 'ole . . ." A flash from Comrade Kookski's eye warned him, and he hurriedly adjusted the facts. "I mean ter say one of the tees took 'is knife and made a post mortem hinquiry, and they got the very size of the feller's boots what kicked 'er to death! I ain't sure but what the Maker's name weren't mentioned, but I wasn't near enough to 'ear distinctly. Any'ow they're sending out a description of the murderer. It's

going to be broadcast to-night, and all the picture 'ouses have it on the screen. Luckily they don't know 'is exact name, except that it begins with G. And there ain't no Lloyd before it either. 'E's a different man; they know that much."

Comrade George's anguish on hearing these terrifying particulars so unmanned him that his two Comrades had to speak to him somewhat plainly.

"Tut, tut, be brave! You cannot have it both ways, Comrade," said Kookski. "If you believe in Communism and Bolsheviks and such splendid violent ideas, then you must act as you believe. You have acted; then you must take the consequences; and be proud of them. But to kill and then cry is absurd!"

"Jack means you've 'ad your fun and now you've got to pay for it," added 'Erb in more homely language. "A feller what enjoys kicking a pore woman to death oughter swing as though he liked that too!"

Yet in spite of their exhortations, they left the unhappy young man in a state of the extremest misery. It was arranged that he should remain secluded in his bedroom till the hue and cry had somewhat abated, and then, if he were fortunate enough to escape capture,

his faithful comrades would arrange for his secret passage to Moscow.

"We might double him up and get him into a barrel of herrings," suggested Kookski.

"Or a barrel of tar," said 'Erb. "Then all 'e'll have to do when he gets out is to roll 'isself in feathers, and 'e won't need a new suit for six months."

"Splendid, Comrade!" said Kookski warmly. "Well, George, we leave you now to congratulate yourself how you have done what you believed in, and how nice it is afterwards!"

## CHAPTER VII

### THE CIGARS

“**N**OW,” said Mr. Essington, “I’ll leave you to keep an eye on that young murderer, while I have a run down to Brighton. Expect me back sometime to-night.”

“I expects lovers when I sees ‘em,” said Erb, with the pessimism of the experienced.

The lover was walking down the familiar little street by early afternoon. The sun had burst out after a rainy morning, and only a few remnants of cloud, delicate and white, were left in the whole blue sky. The sea air was uplifting, and Mr. Essington’s spirits high.

“The omens are good!” he thought. “I’ll find her alone and I’ll find her kind. I wonder how long it will take her to recognize me through this beard!”

The little bell went “ting” as usual when he opened the shop door, and two people turned to see who was coming in.

“Damn!” said he to himself. “I’ll have to shift this blighter at all costs!”

One of the people was Miss Eve, charming and slender and irresistible as ever, but, he thought, not quite so radiantly bright. The other was a man, whose appearance he regarded instantly with the extremest disfavour.

She recognized him the moment he entered. He saw it in a leap of something to her eyes that half delighted, half disquieted him. There was gladness in it, and yet acute and poignant fear. He was on guard at once.

"Mademoiselle, good day!" he said, saluting the proprietrix with a sweep of his hat, in the best continental style. "Have you a such-like thing as a cigar to buy in your nice shop?"

"What kind would you like, sir?" she inquired, with the same polite smile she gave to all customers.

"I should like to inspect several cigar, if you will permit." He turned to the stranger and made him a similar bow. "But this gentleman is first here. When you have finished, sir, I shall begin."

For a moment he thought this strategy was going to succeed brilliantly. The man stared at him, and then moved away from the counter. But it was not towards the outer door that he turned.

"I'll wait inside, Eve," said he, and passed

through the other door into the inner room. He closed it behind him, but over the top of the partition every word could be heard. Mr. Essington saw a flash of indignation in her eye as the man walked into her private room, but she uttered not a word of protest. As the door closed, she laid her finger for an instant on her lip. Mr. Essington nodded, and then remarked aloud, "It is pleasant to see the sun, Miss."

"Yes, sir," she agreed, as she laid one box of cigars after another on the counter.

"Some things one sees in Brighton are not so pleasant."

He glanced towards the partition and then at her. Fear again was in her eye, and she gave him a little warning headshake.

"Ah, I fear you are so fond of Brighton you do not like me even to say that!" he added audaciously.

"No, sir, I am not quite so fond of Brighton as you suppose," she replied quietly, but with meaning in her eye.

He picked one cigar out of a box, held it up, and threw a glance towards the inner room to show what it represented.

"Do you know much about that kind of cigar?"

"Yes, sir, a good deal."

"Do you recommend it?"

"I am afraid, sir, it is scarcely one of my best."

"It looks to me rather peculiar."

"It is, sir."

"Have you had it long in stock?"

"Yes, sir, I laid that in some years ago."

They looked at one another for a moment in silence. His eyes were full of concern.

"A bad bargain then, Miss?"

"Yes, sir, one is occasionally deceived."

"You would almost wish to get rid of such a cigar, I should think! You will throw it away cheap, eh?"

She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head silently.

"I'm afraid sir—in my business—one has difficulties. I can't very well throw away—even if I feel tempted."

Again they looked at one another. His eye was luminous with inquiry. He picked a cigar out of another box, held it beside the first and pointed to her to show what it stood for.

"These cigars are much alike; they might be brother and sister!" he observed in a facetious voice.

"No, sir, they are hardly that," she answered

in a voice that smiled, but not with smiling eyes.

"Relations anyhow!" he laughed.

She nodded briefly, and he looked at her with a lengthening face. Suddenly he pointed to the band round the cigar.

"This little gold band that is round it, like a ring—what do you say in English?—a marriage ring! That is important, eh?"

"It makes all the difference, sir."

He looked at her for an instant and then down into the box.

"I see, I see!" he murmured, and then began to make remarks about the various brands, without any significance in his voice this time, and without looking at her.

When he did look up, he saw that she was writing hard in pencil on a slip of paper. Presently she handed it to him, with a warning glance towards the partition. He read it, still commenting on the cigars as he read.

He knows about your visits and is waiting to blackmail you. He only knows you as White, not your real name or who you are. He knows that Bennet came and tried to catch you. He hopes that either you or Bennet will come back. I can do nothing. I'm sorry!

He finished reading it, put it in his pocket, and then looked at her with another expres-

sion in his eye. It was the dare-devil gleam she knew of old.

"I will take this cigar," he announced, and laid a florin on the counter, making at the same time a gesture as of removing something beyond the screen into the street. She frowned and shook her head at him as she handed him his change, but he merely smiled. Then he said, "I would like refreshment, Miss, and I do not know Brighton and where to find a drink. Perhaps that gentleman can inform. I shall venture to ask him."

And without giving her time even to signal her disapproval, he promptly opened the door of the inner room.

"Pardon me, sir," he said in his blandest accents, "but may I inquire if you are what you call teetotaler?"

"Me?" said Mr. Bradford, staring at him and gradually relaxing into a grin. "No, that's not my complaint."

"Then will you do me the great kindness to direct me so that I can find what you call a pub? And if you will show me the way, sir, I will be much pleased if you will join me in having what you call a drink."

Bradford's grin became a hearty laugh. He jumped up.

"That's the kind of offer it seems a pity to refuse!" said he. "All right, I'll show you where to go."

Mr. Essington bowed again.

"I congratulate myself! May I have the honour of inquiring your name, sir?"

"Bradford."

"Eve Bradford!" thought Mr. Essington. "Damn the man!" Aloud, he replied, "My own name it is Mr. Kookske from Russia."

"From Russia? Not a Bolshie, I hope?"

With a clear conscience Comrade Kookske assured him:

"The very opposite, I assure you! I am in fact—" He was about to add, as a mere simple little touch of verisimilitude, 'the exiled Prince Pushkin Romanoff Kookske,' when he observed Miss Eve standing by the other door. With less than his usual aplomb, he repeated instead, "in fact the very opposite."

They passed through the shop, and the polite Russian hastened to hold the outer door open for Mr. Bradford.

"After you, sir!" he insisted, and, as Bradford went out, he turned and waved a parting salutation.

## CHAPTER VIII

### AN INTERRUPTION

THEY had only gone a short way from the shop when Mr. Bradford was startled to hear the Russian stranger remark in a wholly English voice, very brisk and businesslike, "Well, Mr. Bradford, any news of our friend White?"

Mr. Bradford stopped short and turned markedly paler.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed, but seemed to find further speech difficult.

The other smiled.

"Francis is my real name," said he, and was surprised at himself for not having realized before the ease with which truth might be combined with camouflage, "I am a private inquiry agent on White's track. I wanted to have a quiet word with you."

Bradford looked a little relieved, but still suspicious.

"And what do you want to see me about?"

"Well, I gather you're after him too, so

it struck me we might as well hunt in couples. What your business is I don't know and I don't care. All I want is to get hold of the man."

They had resumed their walk; Bradford exceedingly thoughtful.

"What do you want to get hold of him for?" he asked in a moment.

"Between ourselves it has something to do with a lady. I'm simply being employed to find the man."

"How did you know I wanted to see him?"

The inquiry agent laughed.

"It's part of my job to find things out."

Bradford glanced at him uncomfortably again. He seemed to be speculating how much Mr. Francis had found out about himself.

"I can't tell you anything about the man, except that he was hanging about my wife's shop, and I want to give him the hiding he deserves!"

The agent's eye seemed to be sceptical.

"That all?" he asked.

"What do you imagine I wanted?"

"Well if I were you I'd suggest a small cheque to soothe my wounded feelings."

It was a very suspicious glance that Mr. Bradford darted at him this time.

"That's what the lady I represent is after," added Mr. Francis.

Bradford cheered up visibly.

"Well, I don't mind admitting I'd thought of making him pay for his impudence myself."

"Didn't I tell you we'd better hunt in couples?" smiled the agent.

They had now arrived at a small hotel with a conspicuous bar entrance.

"This place is all right," said Bradford, and they turned in.

The ex-Russian was as hospitable as his promise, and in a minute or two they were standing together at the quietest end of the bar, each with a tumbler. Bradford had quite laid aside all signs of suspicion now and was very friendly indeed.

"Look here," said he confidentially, "between ourselves, what's the man's real name? Of course, I have a pretty good idea, but I'd just like to see if I am right."

"What's your idea?"

"Well, just to show you I do really know, it ends in 'ington'."

The sphinx could not have smiled more cryptically than Mr. Essington.

"You catch him for me and I'll tell you the rest."

Mr. Bradford swallowed his disappointment and half his whisky at a gulp.

"Do you expect him back in Brighton?" he asked.

"I want to find out, and I'll tell you who knows—Miss Eve!"

"My wife? Damn her, I'm certain she does; but how's one going to get it out of her?"

It was the agent's turn to grow confidential.

"Just leave her to me for this afternoon, and I'll bet you a couple more drinks, Mr. Bradford, I'll learn something!"

"You want me to keep out of the way for a bit?"

"Exactly."

Bradford eyed him cunningly.

"Will you tell me his name then?"

"If I get any news for you, I'll tell you his name."

"Well, I'm sure I've had enough of the girl. A pretty wife she has been to me! I won't go near the place. I'll leave the b—to you this afternoon."

For a moment Mr. Essington made no answer. He finished his drink to hide his feelings, and kept very still.

"If I move one foot, it will be certain to kick him!" he told himself.

"Thank you, Mr. Bradford," he said. "You are behaving exactly as I had expected. I am much obliged. What will you have now? Another of the same? I'll leave you to drink it alone if you don't mind. I have got to get back to town and must make use of my time."

With a promise to communicate with his valued ally the moment he got any information, he left him at the bar and strode swiftly back the way they had come.

This time she was alone in the shop, and her look of glad surprise as she saw him standing by the counter when she came out of her sanctum, washed the abominable Bradford clean off his memory.

"What has happened?" she asked.

"I am afraid, my dear Eve, I have departed slightly from dead spit accuracy," he confessed. "However, it has induced that amiable gentleman to give me a free hand with you for this afternoon. Will you forgive me?"

"Yes, this time!" she smiled. "But what have you told him?"

"Without going into details which would merely bore you and waste precious time, I may say that I am assisting him to get hold of Mr. White. It is more or less understood that we are to split the loot if I do secure the

fellow. In fact it is really a very satisfactory arrangement. Mr. Bradford is now happily ensconced in a comfortable bar, and I am with you!"

Her face fell the moment he touched a serious note.

"I am glad I have this chance of saying good-bye to you, sir," she answered.

"Another 'sir' and I leap the counter!" he threatened.

She smiled faintly.

"Very well, as it is our last talk."

"Our last! Eve dear.... Hang it, come into the back room and talk to me there!"

She shook her head firmly.

"It is no use, Mr. Essington. You know my story now, and there's nothing left to tell you."

He gazed at her, and then suddenly demanded,

"Why in God's name did you ever marry such a thing?"

"I was very young, and he was different then—at least to look at, and to me. He was older than I, and handsome, and knew how to get round women. And I was a perfect fool!" She controlled herself, and added quietly, "Well, it can't be helped now. I hoped I had seen the last of him. He promised not to mo-

lest me again, but he has broken his word and come back."

"Was that why you said it was 'impossible' when I asked you to marry me?"

She bowed her head slightly, and then added quickly:

"But there were other reasons—I told you those!"

"Damn the other reasons! You care for me, Eve; I see it in your eye! I'm going to take you away from here!"

"No, no, no! I can't, I won't. I have made my plans. I am all right. I can take care of myself!"

"What plans?"

She seemed to hesitate for an instant.

"I mean that you needn't be afraid he will trouble me."

"I'll see to that, Eve, dear, you are coming with me!"

He threw up the flap of the counter as he spoke, sending a couple boxes of cigarettes that were lying on it, clattering to the floor. The next moment he was behind the counter too, and Eve shrinking back with such a contrast between the protest in her voice and the look in her eyes that Heaven knows what might have happened—when the little bell rang out

sharply. The customer who entered was just in time to see a tall, bearded figure in top boots hurriedly beating a retreat from behind the counter. Essington, on his side, had recognized this customer instantly. It was his old acquaintance Mr. Bennet, and he stood not on the order of his going, but, raising his hat in farewell, went at once. He moved so quickly that he was past Bennet and at the door before the newcomer had time to catch more than a glimpse of him. And then, for once in a way, his presence of mind deserted him. The temptation to catch one last glimpse of her was too strong. He turned in the door-way and looked back. He saw her face, pale and anxious, but smiling swiftly as he caught her eye. But he also caught Mr. Bennet's eye, and perceived a flash in it, scarcely of recognition, but of quick surprised interest that might well precede recognition. Then he shut the door behind him and started down the street.

"The devil!" he said to himself, and at that moment spied a cab. A glance at his watch showed him he had just time to catch a train up to town. Automatically he hailed the cab, and caught his train as it was moving out; and only began to think when he saw the open country rushing by a mile out of Brighton.

"How the deuce has he got on my track again? Or is he simply trying Brighton once more on spec?" he wondered. "In any case it's Beech House and Bolshevism for me till the coast is clear again! That's the only safe refuge!"

For the rest of the journey he sat lost in quite other thoughts.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE RETURN

FROM his youth upwards, reticence had never been a marked feature of Francis Essington's character. During his spirited seasons that virtue almost clean disappeared. His ingenuous candour may not always have been dignified, but it largely accounted for the rapidity with which he made friends in every walk of life, and the warm regard which even the least promising of them felt for him.

"I don't know what there is about the poor gentleman," 'Erb said to his professional acquaintances, "but some'ow or other 'e gets me in the most hextraordinary way. Me and 'im's that friendly, I couldn't 'ave believed it! 'Im bein' a toff don't seem 'ardly to matter at all."

On his return to town he plunged at once into the most moving account of his luckless love affair, causing 'Erbert to sigh and murmur in heartfelt sympathy.

"And now, my dear 'Erb," said he at the finish, "I've got to take the young stinker back

to his blinking home, and lie low there myself for a bit. But I really haven't the spirit to stuff him up with the necessary explanation. I'll help you to compose it, but you must do the talking."

"Anything to oblige you, Jack," said 'Erb cordially. "I ain't a silent man, especially if I knows what to say."

All day Comrade George had lurked in his bedroom, a prey to the acutest remorse and the most miserable apprehensions. Every sound in the house filled him with an agony of fear, and as it was a much frequented hostelry, he had already lived through an eternity of terror, when he was thrown into a fresh spasm by the sound of heavy footfalls ascending the stair, and then actually coming towards his room.

"At last—the police!" he thought, and was almost thankful to have the suspense ended.

His door stood locked, not to be opened by himself save by a certain elaborate knock devised by 'Erbert. With a gasp of relief he heard it now, and then, half way to the door, hesitated. Could the police have learnt the secret of the knock and be enticing him to his doom?

It sounded again, loud and impatient. He

unlocked the door and saw his two fellow Bolsheviks.

"Well?" he gasped. "Have they discovered anything more?"

Both shook their heads with a deeply disappointed air.

"My God, what has happened?" he cried.

"You've made a mess of it, young feller, after all," said 'Erb. "Couldn't even out a blinkin' woman properly!"

"What do you mean? Tell me! What do you mean?" implored George.

'Erb shook his head with an expression of intense disgust.

"Not even usin' both feet, you didn't manage it! That there feller Smith wot said 'e dived in for her, 'e's a blarsted liar. She swum ashore 'erself!"

"Then—then isn't she dead after all?"

"Dead? I wouldn't trust you to kill flies arter this! 'Opping about wavin' her arms dryin' 'erself—that's what she's doing! I told you I could only see 'er through the perlice-men's legs. That's 'ow I come to make a mistake. What they was really doin' was giving 'er beef-tea through a tube like as they does to lydies what swims the Channel. And the

knife was only to cut 'er stays and restore hartificial respirations. They'd got a man down special from 'Yde Park what's used to rescuing bathers. I never seed such a bit o' bungling in all my born life! 'Adn't you got your styletto on you, or a bomb, or even a bit o' poisoned cheese? You'll never get into the Sunday pypers at this rate! Lucky your mother ain't 'ere to feel ashamed of you!

Comrade George seemed singularly little concerned at the thought of the greatness he had missed.

"And what about the police—are they still after me?"

"Arter *you*?" said 'Erb contemptuously. "They've 'eard of a feller that's stole a tanner from the till while the old lydy was looking the other way, and they're arter 'im now. What they wants is *real* crime. They're going to invite you to 'old the babies while the mothers is in 'aving a drink. The Bolshies ain't going to let you land in Russia now, a hundesirable alien they calls you!"

Suddenly George burst into tears; tears of acute hysterical relief. 'Erb stared at him in blank amazement.

"D'ye mean to say 'e's really ashamed of 'issel he didn't do 'er in?" he whispered.

His fellow Comrade shook his head.

"It's a sign of grace," said he, "but he has got to have his nose held down into it for a bit longer."

He patted the still shaken George on the back, and said in a tone of grave commiseration:

"It is bad luck, Comrade, but another time you will do better."

"He oughter begin on little girls," suggested 'Erb. "That would learn 'im."

"Anyhow he has now had the satisfaction of seeing how glorious it feels to act like the great men he believes in. Haven't you, George?"

But George returned no answer.

With their common purse at his disposal, Comrade Kookski thought it well worth the money to secure a car and make a journey home as speedy as possible, picking up their luggage at Wimbledon on the way. At intervals in the course of their drive, he offered consolation on what he persisted in referring to as George's ill luck in not finishing the business properly.

"I know you meant well, Comrade," he said, "but woman, she is most difficult to get rid of. It has puzzled many, many men before you, George!"

But George was singularly unresponsive. Indeed he scarcely said a word the whole way.

The bell was answered by Withers, and at the sight of the returned wanderers, his eyes opened very wide. Then one of them closed for an instant, but not the other. It was a perfectly respectful gesture, and charged with significance.

While George removed his coat, his Comrade stepped aside with Mr. Withers and whispered:

“What’s up?”

“A shindy, my lord. *She’s* been at it with her ladyship. They quarrels sometimes, but it’s a regular blow out this time! Miss Beryl spits first, and her ladyship tells her ‘er language was a middle class imitation of a divorced peeress. That got Miss Beryl’s goat proper. She thinks she’s it for genuwine depravity, and she lets go again, nastier than before. Her ladyship keeps her ‘ead, and tells her she supposes she’s been kissed once in the dark and it has been and excited her. Unfortunately I ’ad to leave the room then, but Miss Beryl has been and said something that’s fair raised Cain in the house. Her ladyship went off to the library double quick to see Mr.

Perrin, and Miss Beryl after her, and they're at it there 'ammer and tongs!"

George came up to them.

"Where's my father, Withers?" he asked.

Withers looked at Mr. Essington, who considered the situation swiftly.

"He is in the library," said he, "and his attention is at present distracted. We are not likely to be asked questions. It seems a good moment to present ourselves."

At the library door he paused for a moment and listened.

"Yes," he said, "they are evidently having a row, Comrade. We will be a pleasant interlude!"

He opened the door and bowed to the assembled three.

"Dear Comrades, I have returned!" he announced.

For a moment there was dead silence. It struck Mr. Essington that he had never seen Lady Twickenham looking so dignified, Mr. Perrin so animated, or Beryl so disconcerted. Then in a loud voice her father boomed,

"She has confessed!"

## CHAPTER X

### IN THE FASHION

THE effect of this announcement on Comrade Kookski seemed to disappoint his hosts. It is true that he immediately assumed a suitably grave expression, but his voice remained calm.

"Tut, tut!" he said. "But you must remember girls will be girls. What has she done?"

"Done!" exclaimed Mr. Perrin. "Do *you* ask that?"

"My dear Robert, don't get excited," interposed the Countess. "These Bolsheviks think nothing of it. Only one oughtn't to let oneself be found out. Kookski, my dear comrade, you've had your fun, and now my husband wants you to pay for it. Are you going to? It's nearly dinner time, so please let us know at once."

"What fun do you mean, gracious lady?" Comrade Kookski asked politely.

"Oh, good heavens, have we got to explain that? If we once started beating about the

bush, we'd better put dinner off till ten o'clock! Shall I whisper the answer to him, Robert?"

"Certainly not!" said Mr. Perrin very emphatically indeed.

"Well then tell him yourself."

"But, my dear, the man knows!"

"Pardon me, Comrade Perrin, but I do not know," said Comrade Kookski, still very politely.

"He really doesn't know the difference between morals and immorals," explained the Countess. "And he probably thinks we don't. My dear Kookski, people in England have got advanced ideas and all that sort of thing, just as you have. We are quite as much up to date really, I assure you. Only one has to observe the ordinary decencies of life. There's such a thing as good form, you know. Of course, most Communists aren't gentlemen and one makes allowances. They are frightfully interesting and I love their ideas, as you know, but I do expect them to behave themselves when they come and stay in this house. The girl's a young fool, of course, but I really didn't expect this to have happened!"

"But what has happened, dear lady?"

Lady Twickenham made a despairing gesture.

"Really this is the most awkward situation! With so many men about one can't be frank. Beryl, tell him yourself what you have told us!"

Thus suddenly appealed to, Beryl showed for an instant unwonted hesitation. Then she said:

"He—he took advantage of me."

"Oh, Lord, how modest we are!" cried the Countess. "Five minutes ago you were boasting of it!"

"I wasn't boasting!"

"Well then, blowing about it—or whatever the latest word is in your circle."

"In *my* circle? I'm as good as you are"

Lady Twickenham shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, well, we won't quarrel about it. Only I didn't know I had quite reached your lofty heights." She turned to Kookski. "Now you know what you've done—even if you didn't before. Have you nothing to say about it?"

"Only that Miss Beryl's memory is better than mine. I had forgot the incident."

"Forgotten it! My dear man, you must keep a diary. It's lucky that one of you happens to remember."

Suddenly Comrade George spoke out. His air was tragic; his voice extraordinarily grave.

"Mr. Kookski, are you going to make my sister an honest woman?"

"Do you mean a truthful woman?" asked Mr. Kookski, as politely as ever.

"I am honest! And it is the truth!" cried Beryl hotly. "And anyhow I don't want your views, George—especially if they are as silly and old fashioned as that! You know you have no morals yourself!"

"I have now," said George very solemnly. "I am going to join the Church of Rome."

"You are going to be sent to bed at nine o'clock," said his father sternly. "And I am going to talk to you in the morning. Mr. Kookski, are you going to marry my daughter?"

"Of course, he is," said the Countess promptly, "as soon as he realizes what he has done, and knows what you propose to settle on Beryl—and you'll have to come down handsomely, Robert—he'll marry her all right. Won't you, Kookski?"

"I should be delighted," said Kookski courteously. "But I think the young lady has now made her little sensation and proved that she is one of those nice bold young ladies that today are in the fashion. She will not want me further."

"Do you want him, Beryl?" asked her step-mother, with her customary directness.

For a moment Beryl hesitated again. Then suddenly the word slipped out,

"Yes."

"Good Heavens!" said Kookski to himself.  
"What the devil shall I do now?"

The library door opened discreetly, and with a little cough to warn the company that they were to be for a few moments in the presence of a critic of genteel conduct, Mr. Withers presented himself.

"Mr. Bennet has called to see Mr. Kookski."

"Comrade Bennet!" cried Kookski with an air of marked excitement; and then his voice sank as he explained in a hoarse dramatic whisper, "From Moscow! He brings great news! Pardon me, I must see him instantly. I will return."

The moment he was out of the room he gripped Mr. Withers by the arm and said in his ear:

"For God's sake, Withers, get me out of this house! I have nearly told a lady she lied; and because I didn't, I'm in the damnedest hole you ever saw! Has this fellow come in a car?"

"He has, my lord."

"Then I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll see him for a moment and offer him a drink. You lead him off somewhere, and I'll bag that car if I have to murder the driver!"

But this desperate programme proved unnecessary. They found Mr. Bennet in the hall, apparently quite recovered from his accident, and looking secretive and purposeful as ever. He stepped forward and handed Mr. Essington a note.

"Read this first, sir," said he.

Mr. Essington's heart leapt at the sight of the writing. He tore it open and read:

"I think you can trust this man.

EVE."

He held out his hand to Mr. Withers.

"Good-bye!" he said. "I'm off with Mr. Bennet as fast as we can make the car move! Pack my things will you, and I'll wire an address to send them to. You've been the one bright spot here, Withers!"

Mr. Withers seemed moved, yet not too moved to impair his dignity.

"Good-bye, my lord. We all has enjoyed your lordship's visit extremely. If I may be allowed to say so, I hopes we shall see you back some day."

"It's damned unlikely," said his lordship.

## CHAPTER XI

### FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

“**T**HIS is really devilish convenient of you,” said Mr. Essington, as they whizzed down the drive. “How did you know I was here, by the way?”

Mr. Bennet smiled.

“I found out who the gentleman was you were lunching with. Mr. Mead gave you away, sir, but quite unintentionally, I assure you. I tried Beech House and found you were off and so I tried Brighton—where we met this afternoon. And then I came back here again.”

“You are a very awkward kind of fellow to have after one! I may tell you candidly I didn’t like your looks from the beginning. As to what your game is, I’m beaten completely. Are you a doctor?”

“No, Mr. Essington, not a doctor.”

“A detective employed by some of my relations?”

Bennet shook his head and smiled again, confidentially and mysteriously this time.

"I am Mr. Cranston's confidential clerk."

"Old Cranston, my curator?"

"Yes, Mr. Essington, he is employing me to keep you in sight."

"To run me in, do you mean?" asked Mr. Essington with a quick glance out of the window that made Mr. Bennet smile again.

"Oh, you needn't jump out again, sir!" said he. "Mr. Cranston doesn't want you—er—well—shut up at present."

"Why not?"

"Pays him better to have you at large; gives him a freer hand. You see, sir, he thinks the doctors might find you were all right again, or your relations might take charge of you, and perhaps look into your affairs. He wants to keep you out of London and wandering about the country as long as you like to wander—the next ten years would suit his book first class! He's doing very well for himself as things are. He did a bit of unfortunate investment a year or two ago; but he's getting right again now—oh yes, he's doing very well now, very well indeed!"

"Pocketing my money?"

"Well, using it to have a flutter with."

"A flutter, by Jingo? I didn't know old Cranston was such a sportsman! I only hope

he's putting it on the right horse. Do you happen to know what he's backing?"

Mr. Bennet opened his eyes very wide indeed.

"I didn't mean he's backing horses. I meant stocks and shares and—"

"Oh, that sort of thing! I never understood 'em, but I believe it's quite possible to have a very sporting flutter that way. Is it coming off?"

"Yes, sir, I fancy he's doing pretty well. He's damned shrewd is old Cranston. He doesn't often come a cropper like he did last time. But it's Trust money and a penal servitude business—"

"Oh, that's all right!" interrupted Mr. Essington easily. "So long as he doesn't drop too much I don't mind."

"But Mr. Essington, don't you see it's a criminal business?"

Mr. Essington seemed surprised at the severity of this view.

"I say, Bennet, you seem to have rather a down on the old boy," he remarked. "What's up?"

"Well, quite apart from the principle of the thing—"

"Oh, damn the principle!" said Mr. Essing-

ton very heartily. "I've just been staying with people with principles, and I've had enough of the things!"

"Well, sir, apart from them, he has treated me pretty scurvily!"

"So now you thought you'd join me? Well, I'm sorry, Bennet, I can't do more for you. I have no money at present, and beyond standing you a drink when we get up to town, and, if you like, tossing you who pays for this car, I really don't see what I can do."

"I had hoped, Mr. Essington, I might possibly do something for you."

"So long as it isn't for the good of my health or my soul, I'll be delighted. By the way, it's no use introducing me to a pretty lady. I've got one already. You know her, of course! Isn't she the most charming girl you ever saw in your life?"

"Yes, very charming indeed, sir," said Mr. Bennet, "but the matter I was alluding to refers to finances."

"My dear fellow, I can't lend you a bob!"

"But you might borrow," smiled Mr. Bennet.

Mr. Essington looked at him with a very animated air.

"By gad, I believe you're going to turn out

quite a different sort of fellow from what I expected! What's your idea? I've been very economical lately, but it's a devilish dull game! I can do with anything you like to offer."

"Well, Mr. Essington, I had been thinking that you would probably be running a bit short, and under the circumstances it wouldn't do to approach Cranston. He'd just shut you up again. But we'll hope it won't be very long before you're all right—I mean to say before you come into your own again. The security might be considered a bit doubtful—"

"I can give you I. O. U's. by the dozen."

"Yes, of course, sir, very good of you. But I'd be trusting mostly to your word of honour, sir, and I am sure I can trust that."

"You're quite right, Bennet. That's the worst of being a gentleman. One's word of honour does tie one damnably by the leg. I don't often give it in consequence. However, I don't mind obliging you."

"Thank you, sir. And, of course, I'd have to ask a little bit of interest, just to cover the risk."

"Interest? Oh, hang it, is that necessary? If I give you a I. O. U. and my word of honour,

it seems to me you'll be doing uncommon well."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Essington, I'll require to have a little interest in addition."

"Oh, well, if you insist. You'll have the trouble of collecting it, not me. What about ten per cent?"

Mr. Bennet shook his head.

"Under the circumstances, ten is hardly—"

"Twenty then?"

"I had thought twenty-five might be—"

"All right, call it twenty-five. Well, thank God, that's settled. One must be businesslike, I know, but it's a devil of a nuisance. I am really infinitely obliged to you, Bennet. And now we'll talk about something pleasanter. You saw Miss Eve last. Tell me exactly your conversation with her after I left; that's to say what *she* said. You needn't trouble about your own answers. And how she looked—especially when you mentioned me."

Mr. Bennet's gifts for describing feminine charm and retailing feminine conversation were hardly on the same level as his business acumen. He did his best, but Mr. Essington shook his head over the result. With his usual tact, however, he thanked him very politely.

"I should think you would broadcast the Stock Exchange news very well indeed, Bennet," he observed.

Yet even Bennet's bald account had served to bring vividly to his memory the slender smiling figure of the girl he loved and the hateful picture of her husband.

"I have money now," he thought, "and so long as Bennet is trusty I ought to be safe. Gad, now for Mr. Bradford—and then for dear Eve!"

They were in the outskirts of London by now, already amid the lights and the traffic and the glimpses of fellow beings on the pavement that always whetted his imagination. Suddenly his eye lit up and he turned to his new ally.

"I'll make it thirty per cent on the first hundred pounds if you'll lend me a hand in doing a good deed!" said he.

Mr. Bennet's eyes gleamed in a way they had when profit was mentioned. At the same time few more wary gentlemen were abroad in London.

"If it is anything I can manage—and if it's legal, you can count on me, Mr. Essington."

"It's to lay out a rascal, and if you can keep it legal I really don't much mind; though I al-

ways think it rather spoils the flavour. Are you dining anywhere in particular?"

Mr. Bennet said he was entirely free.

"Well then advance me a tenner and I'll tell you about it over the best dinner we can raise."

## CHAPTER XII

### BLACKMAIL

ON a late afternoon, when dusk had fallen and the town was already lit up for the night, and people were leaving it in crowds in every outgoing train, one train steamed into Victoria Station with a party of passengers bound the other way. The last to leave the train was a single man in a slouch hat drawn down over his eyes. He seemed in no hurry, for he loitered slowly down the platform in the wake of his fellow passengers and only passed through the barrier after the last of them had disappeared. Then he paused and looked anxiously about him.

Out of the shadows another man emerged, and raised one hand in signal. The first man followed to the entrance of the station and there they met.

"Good evening, Mr. Bradford," said the man who had been waiting. "It's all fixed up."

He spoke in a guarded voice, and Mr. Bradford answered with equal discretion.

"Will he do it?" he asked.

"Yes. He's going to pay in notes too."

"A thousand?"

"I've screwed it up to twelve hundred."

"Good for you, Bennet!" said Mr. Bradford with high appreciation. "But look here, I say, need we bring this other man into it?"

Bennet gave a short laugh.

"We can't help ourselves. He won't be shaken off. In fact he insisted on driving me here. There he is."

He pointed to a taxicab standing a few yards away by the kerb.

"Do you mean the cabman?"

"That's the chap. He ran our man down for us, Mr. Bradford, and damn it, he deserves something! Besides, it wouldn't be safe to bilk him now. Come on, get into the cab and we'll all go and have a drink together first."

"I could do with that!" said Bradford.

The two got into the cab and a few minutes later got out again in a narrow side street opposite the entrance to a quiet bar. The cabman jumped off his seat and followed them in. They had the private bar to themselves and there Mr. Bennet introduced the two other conspirators.

"Mr. Herbert—Mr. Bradford," said he.  
"What'll you both have?"

Mr. Herbert's fancy was beer. Mr. Bradford went more dashingly for a Scotch.

"And now," said Bradford, "I'd like to know exactly what's been settled."

"In the first place," said Bennet, "he got your letter all right, and he showed it to me. You put the wind up him properly, as Mr. Herbert can bear witness!"

Thus appealed to, Mr. Herbert drew his sleeve across his lips and assumed an expression suitable to a conspirator.

"I never seen a gent in such a blinkin' funk in my life!" he declared. "Sweat was a-pourin' from every 'ole in his skin and you could have 'eard his teeth chatter out at 'Ammersmith! 'My Gawd, 'Erb,' says he—'E calls me 'Erb quite familiar like, not knowing I know what I does know about 'im—'I dunno whether I oughter pay the perisher or skip for Geneva and disguise myself as one of them League o' Nations.' 'E makes a wonderful lifelike fur-riner when he tries, I can tell you!"

'Jack' says I—for that's what I calls 'im, so as to make him think I were a pal—'You just put your blinkin' 'and in your blinkin' pocket, and no more blinkin' nonsense! I'm on your

track,' I says, 'and if you goes to Geneva, I goes too, and even if you disguises yourself as old Baldwin, I'll spot you!'

"And then, seein' as I know what I does know, and bein' in the know, and all that, 'e throws in his 'and. 'Spare me, 'Erb, for the sake o' my wife and fam'ly!' says 'e. 'You've got no perishin' wife and fam'ly, you blighter!' says I. 'Runnin' off with other chaps' wives—that's what you does,' says I. 'And you've got to be learned a lesson. I never met such a immoral chap in all my life!' I says. 'But I've found you out and me and Mr. Bennet and that poor Mr. Bradford what you've used so badly, we're goin' to make you subscribe to some deserving charity,' I says. 'And just to save you the trouble of choosing a charity—which it might take you a long time to find one, you bein' such a 'eathen—we're goin' to 'elp you by taking the subscription ourselves, and lookin' for a charity afterwards. And it's got to be twelve 'undred pounds,' I says, 'and not a bit less!'"

"You have done very well indeed," said Mr. Bennet emphatically, "and deserve your share of the subscription. He's still at the hotel waiting for us, is he?"

"He can't escape," Mr. Herbert assured

them. "I give the chambermaid five bob to keep 'er eye on him—the ugly one, for I wouldn't trust him with no pretty girls, or he'd get round 'em like as he did with pore old Bradford's missis."

Thus reminded afresh of his wrongs, Mr. Bradford swore an emphatic oath that Mrs. Bradford's admirer should pay for his villainy, and thereupon the three set forth.

Mr. Herbert drove them eastwards till they reached the Strand. Then came a turn or two, and they found themselves before the door of an exceedingly quiet, respectable hotel, exactly the place for a gentleman to lurk who desired reasonable comfort and complete privacy. Mr. Bennet led the way in, upstairs and then along a passage to a private sitting room. He knocked, and a voice bade them come in. Standing before the fire was a tall gentleman in an immaculately cut tweed suit, with an air that impressed Mr. Bradford very unfavorably as being altogether too superior for his taste. In his hand he held a letter, and he bowed to the three gravely.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," he said. "I understand you have come to see me with regard to a small matter of twelve-hundred pounds. Is that the case?"

It had been arranged by Mr. Bennet in the cab that Mr. Bradford, as the principal sufferer by Mr. Essington's conduct and the largest prospective sharer in the penalty to be inflicted, should do the conversation.

"It is the case," said he. "You've got the letter, I see."

"I have. It is from you, I gather?"

"Yes, it's from me all right," said Bradford with a wink towards his confederates. "Who did you think it was from?"

"I wished to be quite certain. In it you threaten to make me co-respondent in an action for divorce, and also to inform the authorities that I ought to be shut up in a lunatic asylum, unless I pay you the sum of one thousand pounds; which has since been raised to twelve hundred pounds. That's the gist of your letter, I gather."

Mr. Bradford began to dislike his tone exceedingly. It was almost as though Mr. Essington were having the presumption to dictate to him.

"Yes," he said, "and now you can cut the cackle and hand over the notes."

"Are you aware of the penalties for blackmail?" inquired Mr. Essington.

"Oh, stow that!" said Mr. Bradford. "I can

look after myself, and so can my friends."

"I think we had better inform Mr. Bradford of the exact position," said Essington.

Bennet turned to his fellow conspirator with a smile which Mr. Bradford liked even less than Mr. Essington's manner.

"You are in the soup, Mr. Bradford," said he. "You have now admitted before two witnesses that you wrote this letter and you have also told us both exactly what your idea was. It's a couple of years hard, at the inside."

"And that's only for beginners," added 'Erb, "if they're under sixteen and 'as belonged to the Boys' Brigade, and bin to church regular, and 'as only been tempted by 'aving had too much to drink so as they didn't know what they was doing, and their pore old mothers' being in 'ospital. What you'll get is fifteen years, and a 'undred wipes with the cat every birthday; and that's only if the beak takes pity on you; which he ain't likely to from your appearance."

"As for your threats, you blackguard," said Mr. Essington, relapsing from his unwonted gravity, "I trust divorce proceedings will be taken—but it won't be by you! You also think you can threaten my liberty. You are too late.

I am now recognized by the best authorities as one of the six sanest men in England!"

"Talk of shutting 'im up in a lunatic asylum!" exclaimed 'Erb. "Do you know where I drove 'im myself only yesterday afternoon? To Buckingham Palace, wearin' a cocked 'at and a sword and medals as thick as measles! And the King 'e takes him by the 'and and says, 'Rise up, Mr. Essington, I'm proud to 'ave met you, and I 'opes you makes that blinkin', stinkin' blighter Bradford sorry he wasn't born a fried eel, instead of somethink that looks like a man and isn't one!'"

All this while Bradford had stood with his mouth hanging open, like a man dazed. Now he suddenly turned and made a rush for the door. But he had scarcely taken two steps before Bennet had him by the neck and flung him into a chair.

"Mercy!" he stammered. "For God's sake d-don't prosecute me, and I'll give you the woman—"

He was interrupted by 'Erb summarily and effectively. The next few minutes he spent in rubbing his cheek.

"I will refrain from prosecuting you on one condition," said Essington. "Your passage is

booked for Australia by Tuesday's boat. One or other of these gentlemen will look after you till then and see you aboard. If you ever return to this country you will be handed over to the police at once."

"There's no Statute of Limitations for criminal offences," added Bennet.

"Do you agree to go?"

Mr. Bradford agreed abjectly.

"Take him out then, Bennet," said Mr. Essington. "I think you have arranged to have the first spell of looking after the fellow."

They went out together, and Mr. Essington heaved a sigh of relief.

"It's been a devil of a business keeping serious for so long!" said he. "Come on, 'Erb, have a drink now and tell me about your latest girl!"

"You're a surprisin' fellow, Jack," said 'Erb. "I almost began to think you was going to turn into a toff for good. If you really are off your chump, well then keep off it, says I. 'Ere's good 'ealth!"

## CHAPTER XIII

### A MEETING

ON Tuesday the boat sailed, bearing Mr. Bradford to the other side of the world. With increasing difficulty Francis Essington controlled himself till the man was off and the business settled. Then, on Wednesday morning, he took the first train down to Brighton.

He turned into the quiet street; he reached the familiar plateglass window, modest in area but dressed more attractively, he thought, than any tobacconist's window he had ever seen; he opened the door and heard the familiar bell ring. And then he stood stock-still and stared. A young man was standing behind the counter; alert and obsequiously smiling; an entire stranger.

"A fine morning, sir," he observed.

"What the devil—" began Mr. Essington, and stopped abruptly.

"Yes, sir?"

"Where is Miss Eve?"

"Miss Eve, sir? Oh, she's away now, sir—

sold the business to me. I just came in on Monday, sir."

"Sold the business?" he repeated. "Where has she gone?"

"Left Brighton, I understand, sir, but really I am afraid I don't know her plans for certain. She seemed rather close about them in fact. Was you a friend of hers, sir?"

"I was."

There was something in his voice that made the young man behind the counter look at him with friendly sympathy. And then an idea seemed to strike him.

"Are you by any chance Mr. White, sir?"

"I am; at least, that is one of my names."

The new proprietor looked a little surprised at this admission. Mr. Essington recovered his presence of mind and added:

"I changed it in accordance with a will. Have you any message for Mr. White?"

"Miss Eve left a letter for you, sir, in case you called."

The young man retired to the back room and returned bearing a letter.

"Thank you," said Mr. Essington and put it in his pocket. He dared not trust himself to read it there, but hurried down to the Front, and on a quiet seat, read this:

Dear Mr. Essington

If by any chance you should still want to see me and come down to Brighton (which perhaps you won't do after what has happened and what you know about me now), I am leaving this note to tell you that I have sold the business and gone away. I am not quite sure yet where I shall settle finally. I have relations in Canada and have just written to them, but nothing will be actually decided till I get an answer.

I should like to try and tell you how much I have appreciated your feelings towards me—I ought to say the feelings you used to have, because what happened may have changed them, yet if you ever read this it will be because you have come down to try and see me, and then you can't have changed utterly! I do appreciate them deeply, and the compliment you paid me in thinking even for an instant of marrying such a poor nobody as I am.

In your own heart you will realize when you think of it, what a wild thought it was; even if there had been no reason to make it impossible. But I will never, *never* forget the thought and cease to value it. And please, please don't change your thoughts of me too much! Perhaps you think one can't touch pitch and not be defiled. But I *loathed* the pitch. I haven't seen the man himself (I can't bring myself to call him anything else), since you left. But he is sure to come back. I can't feel safe any longer. I made up my mind to sell the business and go away the first day he came here. It was all settled when I saw you. The only reason I didn't tell you was because you might still have wanted to see me, and if you had—Francis dear, I couldn't trust myself!

I didn't mean to say that and I ought to tear the letter up. I am a fool not to!

Good-bye.

Your very sincere friend

EVE.

P. S. It is *no use* trying to see me again. I have practically decided to go to Canada, and meantime I will be far away from Brighton. Good-bye.

In the afternoon of that same day Mr. Es-sington left the tube station at Piccadilly Circus and strolled westwards. How much risk there still was in showing himself he did not know, and at the moment he scarcely cared. Bennet had warned him to get out of London as soon as possible and not to show himself while he was in it, but what he wanted now was distraction—the streets full of traffic, the pavements crowded with people. So he strolled along the sunny side of Piccadilly, his spirits gradually catching contagion from the crowd.

"I'll find her again, though she hides herself inside an iceberg!" he said to himself. "This is merely an interruption!"

A young man and a girl were just about to pass him, when the young man stared very hard and as they passed, half stopped. Mr. Es-sington caught his eye, stared back, and then wheeled round.

"My dear Mead!" he cried.

"I thought it was you, Major," smiled Valentine, "though you do look a little different in those clothes."

"The difference extends to my name. If this lady you are lucky enough to be escorting is only half as nice as she looks, I should be very grateful if you would introduce me to her—under the name of Mr. Essington. This time I can assure you it's a winner; perfectly genuine in every syllable."

As the lady could overhear every word of the conversation, her first impression of the gentleman with two names was mixed. The compliment was gratifying, yet the audacity of his request was a little disconcerting. Valentine could hardly refuse it, but he performed the introduction somewhat stiffly.

"Mr. Essington—my cousin, Miss Marjorie Davenant."

"I congratulate your common ancestor!" said Mr. Essington with a bow and sweep of his hat for which he apologized at once. "Pardon my foreign habits, but when one has been a dashed Russian for a week or two, it is a little difficult to recover one's equilibrium. Let us now come and have tea together. I am the host this time, Mead!"

The cousins glanced at one another and hesitated.

"Don't you want to hear my adventures

since we last met? I assure you they are really quite entertaining."

The hesitation disappeared.

"Thank you very much," said Marjorie.

"My dear girl, if you had the faintest idea how pretty you are, you would realize that the thanks are the other way on!"

Marjorie began to think that though Mr. Essington was undoubtedly somewhat unusual, his peculiarities were not altogether objectionable.

The hour was early, and without difficulty they found a table in a quiet corner of a tea room within a stone's throw of where they stood. But even in that short walk Mr. Essington's experienced eye had noted that the relations of these two young people were scarcely those of ordinary cousins. When they sat down he kept his eyes on Marjorie's left hand, and as soon as she had removed her glove, he exclaimed,

"I was sure of it! Allow me to congratulate you both!"

Her eyes followed his. She glanced down at the ring, laughed and blushed.

"How very observing of you!" she said.

"It is a precaution which every man should take. The amount of time that has been

wasted in proposing to girls with engagement rings, and not proposing to ladies with wedding rings, would astonish you. It is really the only way of knowing where one is."

He turned to Valentine and inquired,

"Have you ever happened to mention to her a young lady in whom I was interested, who lives in the County of Surrey?"

His tact in suggesting that the young lady was his own and not Valentine's weakness, pleased them both extremely.

"You mean Beryl? Oh yes, Marjorie knew all about her all the time."

"Then I can tell you you've had a devilish lucky escape! And to think of your having this charming girl to fall in love with all the time! I suppose one gets too used to cousins, and doesn't realize how nice they are."

By this time Marjorie had quite decided that any little eccentricities in Mr. Essington's manner were really the manifestations of a very attractive nature.

Tea arrived, and over it he gave them a very full and candid account of what had befallen him, not only at Beech House, but in London and at Brighton. It is true that he left a few points rather obscure. Precisely why he should have to take such elaborate precautions

to avoid recognition, and who was trying to recognize him, he did not explain further than to drop at one moment a hint of an enemy he had made when travelling in Brazil, and at another of work in connection with the Secret Service. He was, in fact, in a state of some indecision himself whether to live up to his new ideals of accuracy, or to present a story that would thoroughly satisfy his audience.

There was also at times a little reticence in his reference to his Brighton adventures, but this did not puzzle Marjorie in the least. She was in love herself and understood.

At last she said they must go, and at the tea room door on the edge of the tide of Piccadilly, they parted from their host.

"You have made me determined to get engaged myself," he said. "I have put it off till rather late, I admit, but I cannot endure to see Valentine so lucky and remain merely half of a happy couple any longer! Good-bye!"

"He was in great form, wasn't he?" said Val.

Marjorie answered nothing for a moment, and said suddenly,

"I'm so sorry for him!"

"Sorry! But, my dear Marjorie, he's simply bursting with beans!"

Marjorie shook her head.

"He is really thinking about that girl all the time. Oh, I hope it ends happily! Don't you?"

"I'm afraid I have been thinking about my own girl," said Val. "But I would like every other fellow to feel as happy as I am—if it were possible. It isn't, however. They can't have you!"

THE END

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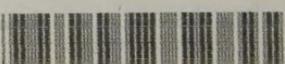












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